

# *The* CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SOLVE A MYSTERY



GRACE BROOKS HILL



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Out of the moonlight shadows he came, a timid  
and shrinking figure of a Chinese.

(see page 143)

# THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SOLVE A MYSTERY

BY  
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GIRLS ON PALM ISLAND," ETC.

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*The Corner House Girls Solve a Mystery*

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# THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SOLVE A MYSTERY

## CHAPTER I

### A DROP IN EGGS

"HELLO!"

"Goodness sakes! don't holler like that again, Sammy Pinkney."

"He almost made me drop the cake batter!"

Tess Kenway, who had administered the rebuke to the small boy when he gave a shout, thrusting his head in through the half-opened kitchen door, fanned herself with her apron as she closed the oven of the stove. Her sister Dot, who was pouring something from a brown bowl into a tin pan, set the former down on the table and shook her finger at Sammy.

"What are you doin'?" asked Sammy, as he slid farther into the kitchen and possessed himself of a chair near the table, looking casually over what it contained.

"Cakes," answered Tess. "I guess the oven's hot enough now, Dot," she went on, again opening and closing the door.

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"Cakes!" exclaimed Sammy, smacking his lips. "I should think if you made *one* cake it would be——"

"We're *each* making a cake, if you please!" declared Tess, with a superior air. "And we wish you wouldn't come around here bothering us—don't we, Dot?"

"Yes, we do," joined in the other small sister. "And if you want any of *my* cake, Sammy Pinkney— Oh, don't you dare sit in that chair!" she shrieked as, dropping a spoon covered with cake batter and thereby spattering the boy, she made a rush for him just in time to prevent him from occupying another chair nearer to the scene of the cake-making.

"What's the matter with that chair?" protested Sammy, in a grieved tone, as he went back to his original place.

"My—my Alice-doll!" answered Dot faintly. "You—you nearly squashed her, Sammy." And, pulling the chair out from beneath the table, she disclosed her very choicest child—the loved "Alice-doll."

"Aw, how'd I know she was there?" asked Sammy.

"You didn't have to come in," retorted Tess, who, though older than her sister, yet shared in the latter's love for Alice and did not want to see her "squashed."

"Pooh, I don't have to come in if I don't want

to," declared Sammy independently. "But I was goin' to show you how you could have some fun."

"Some fun?" questioned Tess, alive to the possibilities in that word.

"What kind of fun?" Dot wanted to know, putting her Alice-doll in a safer place.

"Aw, what good would it do me to tell you!" and Sammy affected an air of injured innocence.

"All you care about is bakin' cakes!"

"We do not—so there!" cried Tess, with an uptilting of her little nose, as she had seen Nalbro Hastings affect on occasions. "If you know any fun, Sammy Pinkney, you ought to tell us, 'cause we'll soon have to go back to school."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Dot. "When I was on Plam Island I never thought of school."

"'Tisn't *Plam* Island," corrected Sammy. "It's——"

"I know what it is! I don't have to get you to tell me!" snapped Dot, for she was a bit sensitive about her mispronunciation, having been corrected so often. "But when my cake's done you can have some, Sammy," she added, more gently, as if ashamed of her little outburst.

"And I'll give you some of mine," offered Tess. "It's going to be chocolate."

"Good!" cried Sammy, and all his ill-feeling vanished.

"Mine's cocoanut," said Dot. "And I guess we'd better put 'em in the oven, Tess. Mrs. Mac-



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Call said to put 'em in when the oven felt hot to your hand."

"All right."

The two little girls, having poured their cake batter into separate tins, placed their concoctions in the oven and closed the door.

"There!" announced Tess. "Now you can tell us about the fun, Sammy," and she seemed to have shaken from her small shoulders the cares of the universe.

"I'm going to be in it, and so is my Alice-doll!" declared Dot, as she brought the pretend-child from the shelf where she had placed her for safety.

"Is Mrs. Mac around?" asked Sammy suspiciously, for he was a bit afraid of the bluff but kind Scotch housekeeper.

"No, she's away upstairs," answered Tess encouragingly. "She won't be down for a long time. She and Ruth and Agnes are talking about doing over one of the rooms. That girl who had something the matter with her teeth is coming to stay a while."

"We're going to have a party," confided Dot. "But these cakes aren't for that," she hastened to say, lest Sammy might think he would have to wait too long for the promised reward.

"You mean that that Nally Hastings you're always talking about is coming?" asked the boy.

“Yes!” answered both little girls. They did not want to talk too much for they desired to hear what fun Sammy had in prospect.

Miss Nalbro Hastings, from Boston, had become acquainted with the Corner House girls some time before. At first she had had the reputation of being affected and “stuck up,” especially in the manner of her talk.

But later it was learned that she was suffering from the loss of some teeth, which had been knocked out in a runaway-horse accident, and this accounted for her speaking of Neale O’Neil as:

“That charming Mistah O’Neil, who ith tho intereththing!”

“Well, if Mrs. Mac isn’t around,” began Sammy slowly— “But where’s your Aunt Sarah?” he suddenly demanded, for he had sharp recollections of how Miss Maltby had more than once sent him “a-kiting,” as she called it, when he had been up to some of his mischief.

“Oh, Aunt Sarah has gone for a ride,” chuckled Tess. “You can tell us, Sammy. But we’ve got to stay in the kitchen until our cakes are done,” she added, lest Sammy’s plan involve going afield with the cake batter still in the oven.

“Oh, we can have some of the fun right here,” replied Sammy. “I guess this is the best place for it, anyhow. You sure Mrs. Mac won’t come down and catch me?” he asked, looking about and

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cocking his head on one side, to listen more sharply.

"No, she and Agnes and Ruth just went upstairs," reported Tess. "They'll be there a long time. Mrs. Mac got the things for us to make the cakes and told us just how to do it. I've made a cake before, but Dot hasn't," and Tess assumed her superior air which moved Dot to exclaim:

"Well, I've eaten cakes, anyhow!"

"So've I!" chuckled Sammy. "And I'm ready to do it again. Well, if nobody's coming I'll show you the fun. Got any raw beefsteak?" he asked, suddenly.

"Raw beefsteak?" questioned Dot, wonderingly.

"Sammy Pinkney, have you got a new dog?" demanded Tess, excitedly. "If you have——"

"Naw, I haven't got a new dog," declared Sammy. "Maybe I'm goin' to have one, though, for Robbie Foote, who delivers groceries for Mrs. Kranz, the delicatessen lady, says he thinks he knows where he can get me a dog if my mother'll let me have it. But I don't guess she will as long as I have Buster."

"I should think not," said Tess, with an air of motherly wisdom.

"But a dog is nice," said Dot. "And if you had one with a very soft and shaggy back, Sammy, I'd let my Alice-doll ride on him. Buster's



only a bulldog and not at all nice. He's really horrid!" and Dot sniffed a little.

"Well, I haven't got the dog—yet," Sammy said.

"Then what do you want the raw beefsteak for?" demanded Tess.

"For the alligator," whispered Sammy, as if he feared that Mrs. MacCall, the Scotch housekeeper, would hear him, even on the top floor of the old and rambling Corner House.

"The alligator!" cried Tess.

"The one we brought you from Plam Island?" demanded Dot.

"'Tisn't *Plam* Island, I tell you!" insisted Sammy. "It's *Palm*, and——"

"I call it *Plam*," remarked Dot sweetly and with an air of finality. "But where is he, Sammy—the alligator I mean? He was so cute, even if he was homely."

"I have him outside," Sammy answered. "I didn't want to bring him in until I was sure it was all right. That's the reason I looked in first and said 'hello!'"

"And nearly made me drop my cake," sighed Dot.

"But what about the raw beefsteak?" asked Tess.

"That's to make the alligator do the trick," explained Sammy.

"What trick?" cried both little girls at once.

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“I’ll show you.”

Sammy went outside again. Tess and Dot were so eager they could scarcely await his return, but it was not many minutes before Sammy again made his appearance with a small box which he put on the kitchen table, shoving to one side spoons, pans and dishes that had been used with prodigal extravagance in the making of two very small cakes.

“Get the beefsteak,” Sammy ordered, with an air of one used to being obeyed.

“I’ll get it. There’s some in the ice box,” offered Tess. “But don’t do the trick until I get back,” she commanded.

“I won’t,” Sammy promised.

While Tess went to the pantry Dot knelt in a chair as close to the mysterious box as she could get.

“Let me just peek at him until Tess comes back,” she pleaded. “You don’t need do the trick.”

Sammy obligingly raised the cover of the box slightly.

“Oh, Sammy Pinkney, what have you done to the lovely alligator?” cried Dot, starting back.

“Keep still! It’s part of the trick,” answered Sammy.

“Oh, you said you wouldn’t do it while I was gone!” cried Tess accusingly, as she came in with some shreds of meat and heard the last words.

"I didn't," declared Sammy. "I was just showing him to Dot. I'll lift him out now. Put the meat on the table."

"I haggled off one end of a steak," said Tess. "I hope Mrs. Mac doesn't notice it."

"If she does," chuckled Sammy, "tell her one of the cats did it."

"There's plenty of them around, but of course Dot and I don't tell fibs," declared Tess. "Now come on. Do the trick, Sammy."

Sammy looked matters over before opening the box. The shreds of meat that Tess had placed on the table caught his eyes.

"Don't leave 'em in such big chunks," he advised. "Snapper will choke on 'em."

"Is that what you call your alligator—Snapper?" asked Tess, as she proceeded to cut up the meat into smaller bits. She and her sisters had brought the scaly reptile back with them from Palm Island as a souvenir for Sammy.

"Snapper is his name, and my mother says snappish is his nature," answered the boy. "But he only snaps when he wants things to eat. I guess those are all right," he went on, as he looked at the bits of steak cut smaller by Tess.

Then he lifted out onto the table a small, tame alligator, at the sight of which the two girls broke into exclamations of:

"Oh, isn't he cute! How did you ever do it! Oh, he looks just like a circus alligator!"

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"Maybe I'll put him in a circus," said Sammy. "But it wasn't easy to dress him up."

Sammy had, with the expenditure of much time and (for him) labor, made a sort of clown suit for the alligator, a little red jacket and green trousers. The two front legs of the small alligator were thrust through the sleeves of the red jacket, and the two hind legs stuck out of the green legs of the trousers.

"Oh, he's too funny for anything!" declared Dot.

"Wait! You haven't seen half yet!" promised the boy.

Again he reached into the box he had carried over from his home, which was catercornered from the Corner House, and this time he lifted out a small wagon, purchased at the five and ten-cent store. To this vehicle he had fastened a harness so that Snapper could be hitched to the toy.

"Oh, isn't that a darling!" cried Tess in ecstasy.

"You could have a show with that!" declared Dot.

"Maybe I will," said Sammy. "But wait, you haven't seen it all yet. Wait till he draws the cart. Keep the meat away from him until I hitch him up," he went on. "Once he starts to eating raw steak he won't pull. I have to bribe him to

do it till he gets better trained. Don't let him get the meat, Tess."

At what, it would seem, was the risk of having her fingers snapped at, the girl removed the bits of meat from in front of the little alligator. Sammy then hitched it to the cart and next, taking a shred of meat, held it a few inches away from Snapper's nose.

Slowly the alligator from "Plam Island" began crawling across the table, anxious to get the dainty, and, as he crawled, he hauled after him the toy cart.

"Oh, that's perfectly wonderful!" cried Tess.

"Too cute for anything!" added Dot. "Look, Alice-doll," she went on, holding her most-loved "child" up to see.

"Aw, what does *she* know about it?" jeered Sammy.

"My Alice-doll knows more'n you do, Sammy Pinkney, so there!" retorted Dot.

Just then there was a noise at the outer kitchen door, and the three children turned apprehensively, thinking it might be their Aunt Sarah or Mrs. MacCall.

"It's only Billy Bumps," remarked Sammy, as he caught sight of the goat entering. Billy was a sort of privileged neighborhood character, but had Mrs. MacCall been present he never would have entered her clean kitchen. However, Sammy, Dot and Tess were not so particular. Besides, they



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were watching the alligator do his trick with the little cart.

But peace and quiet was not to reign for long. Billy Bumps, discovering on a small table in a corner a bit of lettuce, began munching this. His tail was toward the larger table, on which Snapper was performing, and, as luck would have it, just then the alligator in his wanderings came to the edge of the table. The goat's slightly moving tail was within easy reach of the jaws.

Perhaps Snapper might have recognized in the goat's tail a resemblance to some dainty he was accustomed to feed on while a resident of Palm Island. Or perhaps Snapper took the goat's tail for a new form of beefsteak, of which he was very fond.

However that may be, this is what happened.

Snapper reached forward and, aiming to bite out a generous section of the goat's tail, took a firm hold.

"Baa-a-a-a!" bleated the goat.

He wheeled around suddenly, and with such force that he swung Snapper from the table to the floor, the alligator loosening its grip. But Billy Bumps had been frightened. He also thought he had been mistreated. With another bleat, in which rage and reproach were mingled, he made a dash for the door by which he had entered.

Just as he reached it there entered Robbie Foote

with some eggs that Mrs. Kranz, the "delicatessen lady," had sent up to the Corner House from her store.

"Oh!" gasped Robbie. And again: "Oh!"

Well might he say that, for the plunging goat took him in the stomach and down went Robbie.

Down went the eggs also, in a smash of shells, whites and yellows on the kitchen floor, and Snapper the alligator, wondering what it was all about, started to crawl through the mess.

"Oh," gasped Tess faintly.

"Oh dear!" cried Dot, more loudly.

"This—this—this is fierce!" stuttered Sammy, gazing wildly at the scene of wreck and confusion.

## CHAPTER II

### A QUEER PAIR

“AGNES, did you hear anything?”

“I’m not sure, Ruth, but I did think I heard something in the kitchen, still——”

“I shouldn’t have left Dot and Tess there alone to finish making their cakes, I’m afraid,” went on the oldest of the Corner House girls. “But they begged and teased so to be allowed to bake something by themselves, that I gave in against my better judgment. I’m always doing that!”

“Don’t reproach yourself,” murmured Agnes. “Oh, I’m afraid I’ve broken one of my nails,” she exclaimed, looking at her well-manicured hands. “Yes, it *is* broken!” she sighed. “And I was going to——”

“Something else besides a fingernail is broken, to judge by the racket down in the kitchen!” exclaimed Ruth, interrupting her “beauty sister,” as she sometimes called Agnes.

Ruth had opened the door of the room in which she and her sister, with the housekeeper, Mrs. MacCall, had been discussing the advisability of having it repapered in anticipation of the time when Miss Hastings should come to visit them, the

Boston girl having accepted a very cordial invitation to stay a few weeks at the Corner House.

"Something *has* happened!" declared Ruth, with conviction.

"Oh, the *puir bairns!*" exclaimed motherly Mrs. MacCall. "Hech! Hech! Mayhap the dratted stove hae burned them! Oh, woe is me!"

"They know better than to get burned," answered Ruth. "But I think we'd better go down and see what has happened."

"You *think!*" gasped Agnes, looking at her fractured nail. "I just *know* we had!"

Followed by Mrs. MacCall, with her ominous "hech! hech!" the while mumbling incomprehensible Scotch words, the two sisters hastened down the stairs. When they caught sight of the kitchen with its mixture of eggs and alligator, Ruth felt like saying what Sammy had said—with added adjectives.

"Oh, what *has* happened?" cried Agnes.

"Sammy was doing a trick, Aggie, and—" began Dot. Then she caught sight of her Alice-doll on the floor with a slowly moving trail of egg yellow, like lava from a volcano, working toward her, and with a cry sprang to save her.

"Trick!" spluttered Robbie Foote, as he arose and wiped some white of egg from his face. "If you call that a trick——"

"What's burning?" asked Ruth.

"Oh, my cake! My cake!" shouted Tess.



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Mrs. MacCall simply raised her hands in the air. She was beyond speech.

"This," said Sammy Pinkney again, "is *fierce!*"

But it was not always thus in the Corner House. Usually the house was as quiet and orderly as is the normal household inhabited by four healthy, happy girls and their friends and playmates. However, this confusion will serve one good purpose. It will enable me to acquaint my new readers more formally with the characters who are to play their parts in this story.

Bloomingsburg was the former home of the Kenway sisters when you first met them in the opening volume of this series, called "The Corner House Girls." There was a reason for that name, since the quartette came to live in the Corner House at Milton. A distant relative of the Kenways, Uncle Peter Stower, had died and left the four orphan girls all his property. This included the Stower homestead, known far and wide in that section as the old Corner House.

Mr. Howbridge, who was named the guardian of the girls, managed matters for them and saw to it that Ruth, Agnes, Dot and Tess were safely domiciled in the Corner House. With them came Aunt Sarah Maltby, an old lady who was rather a trial at times, for she was always afraid something was going to happen. What this "some-

thing" was she never could be sure of, but it was an ever-present fear.

However, the looking after the girls devolved more upon stanch Mrs. MacCall and Uncle Rufus, the devoted colored servant of the late Peter Stower, so Aunt Sarah did not need to be relied upon.

Thus Ruth, the oldest, and her three sisters, came to live in the Corner House, the poverty days in Bloomingsburg being a thing of the past.

"She might have come along and visited us just as we are, and just as she was," complained Ruth. "But I suppose she thought she had to run back to Boston for more dresses."

"That reminds me," said Agnes thoughtfully, carefully filing her broken nail. "I suppose we shall need new gowns for the party. Oh, can't we afford it, Ruth?"

"I think so." And Ruth smiled. "We haven't been very extravagant, Mr. Howbridge says." She referred to their man of affairs. "He says we have some of our summer allowance left."

"Good! Then I'm going to have that voile I've wanted so long. And it's going to be lavender, too."

"I suppose that's Neale's favorite color," remarked Ruth.

"What if it is? Doesn't Luke like those pale, neutral tints, and——"

"I like them myself," interrupted Ruth de-

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murely, "and I saw the loveliest shade of— Who are those two men coming in?" she broke off to ask the housekeeper.

"Wha' twa min, dearie?"

"Those queer-looking ones—like two tramps. I just saw them going around toward the side entrance. Dot and Tess are on the porch. I don't want tramps to frighten them or Linda. I'd better go down and see who they are. I don't like their looks."

"But we haven't settled about the paper for Nally's room!" called Agnes.

"You settle it with Mrs. Mac," returned Ruth. "I must see about those two queer men."

Dot and Tess had not long lived in their new home before they made the acquaintance of Sammy Pinkney, who dwelt catercornered from the Corner House, and Sammy, Dot and Tess had royal good times together.

Ruth and Agnes, being older—in fact, Ruth now being quite a young lady—had more mature friends. Among them might especially be mentioned Luke Shepard. His name was being coupled with Ruth's in "quite a matrimonial manner," Agnes laughingly remarked, at which Ruth retorted:

"You needn't talk! What about Neale O'Neil?"

Whereat Agnes had the grace to blush.

Luke Shepard was a young collegian who was

more or less at the Corner House—less when at college and more often during vacation times. Luke lived with his sister Cecile at Grantham, not many miles away. Their Aunt Lorena kept house for the young folks. They had a very good neighbor, and this neighbor had aided Luke in going to college. But now the young man was helping himself, having become an assistant during his vacations to a certain Professor Keeps. Often Luke came to Milton, staying with Neale O'Neil when he did so.

As for Neale, there was a romantic history connected with him. After running away from the circus he had lived with the Milton cobbler, and there was a mystery about his father who had gone to Alaska in search of gold. There were dark days for Neale until his father came back, not fabulously rich, but in much better circumstances than when he went away.

However, the wanderlust called Mr. O'Neil, and he went away again, first, however, providing well for his son. Had he wished, Neale might have had a house of his own, but he continued to live with old but loving Con Murphy, and he continued, too, to look after many details for the Kenway girls around their place. That this gave him a chance to see Agnes more often, may have had something to do with it.

The Kenway girls made the most delightful friends, and what wonderful adventures they had



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is told in the volumes of this series succeeding the first. These happenings included going to school, camping out, giving a play, making an odd find, touring, and growing up. Once the four were snowbound and had a most amazing time, and again they spent a summer on a houseboat, following which they had a rather "hectic time," as Agnes called it, among the Gypsies.

Their latest adventures had been on Palm Island, or, as Dot insisted on calling it, "Plam Island," whither the quartette went because a change to a warmer climate was needed for their health, severe colds having been contracted when Ruth and Agnes attended a party on a stormy wintry day.

In spite of some very exciting and not altogether happy adventures related in "The Corner House Girls on Palm Island," which is the title of the volume immediately preceding the one you are now reading, the girls enjoyed their summer vacation. They had been home now about two weeks, when there occurred the happening set down in the first chapter of this volume.

Wishing to bring Sammy Pinkney back some souvenir from Palm Island, an alligator, not too large, had been selected, though Dot said he had expressed a preference for a "turkle." However, the turtles, of which there was an abundance on Palm Island, were far too large to bring

north, and the young alligator had been a compromise.

That Sammy was delighted with his new pet goes without saying. He even gave Snapper more attention than Buster, his bulldog, received. Then Sammy got the idea of dressing up the alligator and of hitching it to a toy cart.

"Oh, children! what happened?" cried Ruth, despair in her voice.

"I—didn't—drop—those eggs!" declared Robbie, speaking in gasps, for some yellow was now running into his mouth. "The goat—he butted me."

"The goat!" cried Agnes, looking around.

"He's gone out now," said Sammy mildly. "The alligator bit his tail!"

"The alligator—" Ruth stopped for want of words.

"Our cakes are burning! Oh, our cakes are burning!" wailed Dot.

There was a decided odor of too-much-baked cake permeating the kitchen.

"I'll take 'em out for yè!" offered Mrs. MacCall. "Oh, ye puir bairns! Sorrow is the day!"

"Tess, tell me about it!" commanded Ruth, when the cakes had been rescued, and only just in time.

While the mess of eggs was being cleaned from the floor by Linda, the maid, who had been down in the laundry during the excitement, and when

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Sammy had ascertained by close examination that his alligator was unharmed (though one wheel of the cart was broken), peace and quiet once more reigned in the Corner House.

“But don’t ever do anything like that again, Sammy!” cautioned Ruth, shaking a warning finger at the boy. “If you want to show off your alligator, do it in the garage.”

“Yes’m,” mumbled Sammy.

The three younger children were sent out-of-doors, with some of the newly baked cakes, and the conference upstairs, as to what kind of paper should be put on the guest room, was resumed.

“Nally is so — so particular,” murmured Agnes, “though she is a dear girl. I’d like her to have a nice room.” They all called Nalbro, Nally now.

## CHAPTER III

### DISQUIETING NEWS

RUTH KENWAY reached the rear porch of the house just as the two queer men—ragged and dirty they were, too—were starting down the outside cellar steps. Ruth had noticed that Tess, Dot and Sammy had departed, probably having gone over to Sammy's house, so there was no fear that the children would be frightened by the tramps. And tramps they seemed to be.

They were really evil-looking men, and for a moment Ruth hesitated. But she had not acted as mother to her younger sisters all these years for nothing. Besides, was not the stout Linda within call and was not Neale in the garage, working over the car? He could be called in a moment. Therefore it was with a very cool, calm and collected voice that she asked:

“What do you want?”

“Oh—er—you see, lady——”

The two men looked up quickly, having been stopped by Ruth's voice on the topmost cellar step. The two looked up, but the evidently older, and certainly the uglier, of the pair, did the talking.



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“There’s been—there’s been a leak in the street water main, lady, and we’ve been sent to look over your pipes,” he mumbled. “We’re from the water department,” he added. “We just want to make sure your pipes are all right.”

He mumbled his words and seemed ill at ease, still Ruth, after hearing that the men were from the water department, did not pay much attention. Once before there had been a break in their street, and the water had to be shut off for a whole day. Ruth remembered this and so said:

“I hope you don’t have to turn the water off. If you do, wait until I have the maid draw some.”

“Oh, I don’t think we’ll have to shut it off, lady,” said the uglier man, his companion having already disappeared into the black depths of the cellar. “If we do I’ll let you know.”

“All right,” Ruth assented as she turned away. It was not uncommon for the gas man, the one who read the electric meter, and the one who kept tally of the water meter, to enter the cellar by this rear door unannounced during the summer when the door was kept open. “The water turns off up in front,” added the girl, thinking the men might not know where to find the stop. “But don’t shut it off without letting me know.”

“No’m,” muttered the spokesman, as he followed his companion.

Ruth walked through the kitchen, which now,

under the powerful ministrations of Linda, was resuming its wonted neat appearance.

"What was it, Ruthie?" asked Agnes, coming down with Mrs. MacCall.

"Just some men from the water department to see about a leak."

"They must na shoot it off until I gang away an' draw some," protested the housekeeper. "Linda, lass——"

"No, they won't turn it off without telling us," Ruth assured her. "Now about the paper—did you settle on a pattern? I want to get the room in shape for Nally."

"I think this is the prettiest," suggested Agnes, holding out a sample, one of several the decorator had left.

"Yes, that will do nicely," agreed Ruth. "And now— Oh, what about eggs?" she asked quickly. "I suppose those poor Robbie brought were all smashed."

"A regular omelet!" laughed Agnes.

"I must telephone Mrs. Kranz for more," said Ruth.

"The boy, he have gone after some," announced Linda. "But he say he hope he no have to pay for them what is braked, 'cause he——"

"Of course we wouldn't think of letting poor Robbie pay for them," declared Ruth. "It wasn't his fault. It was Sammy's—with the girls' goat and his alligator."

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"As much the fault of Dot and Tess as Sammy," declared Agnes. "They shouldn't have let him turn the kitchen table into a circus ring."

"Oh, well," and Ruth smiled, "I'll just telephone Mrs. Kranz to put the second dozen on our bill and not to scold Robbie," and as she went into the other room to the telephone, Mrs. Mac-Call softly observed:

"Your sister, she thinks of everything, Aggie, my dear! She wauld nae hae Rabbie scoldit the day."

"And quite proper, too. But you are right, Mrs. Mac. Ruth is an angel!"

When Ruth, unaware of the kind words spoken in her absence, had finished straightening out the egg matter, Agnes telephoned for the paper hanger to come and see about redecorating the room Miss Hastings was to occupy during her stay. There were to be other guests at the house party, which was to last at least a week, but the Boston girl was the one over whom the most "fuss" was made.

"We want to give her a good impression of us," said Agnes.

"Oh, it isn't exactly that," declared Ruth. "She isn't a bit haughty and stand-offish, as we at first supposed."

"And since she has her new teeth and talks like a human being I adore her!" declared Agnes. "But that room needed papering anyhow. Now

let's talk about our dresses. I wish we could get some one besides Ann Titus to make them."

"But she's the best one in Milton, and she needs the money," said Ruth, gently.

"I know, but she does talk so! If she's working here and we happen to have corned beef and cabbage for dinner—as we do sometimes—it's known all over Milton next day."

"Yes, she does talk a lot. But—well, we'll see about it. Have you invited Cecile, Agnes?"

"Of course. Think I'd forget her? I put her invitation in with Luke's."

"Oh—" Ruth blushed a little.

"Didn't you expect to have him come?" demanded the "beauty sister."

"Oh, yes, he might drop in——"

"*Drop* in, my dear! He'll *fly* in at the least opportunity. It's my firm belief that he has Linda subsidized!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he bribes her to keep him posted about goings on here, and whenever we have the least bit of festivity Luke arranges his college schedule so he can get time off—make cuts, you know—so as to be here. Of course he only comes to see Neale," and Agnes tilted her pretty nose into the air.

Ruth laughed, evidently not ill pleased with her sister's declaration.

"As for Neale," went on Agnes, "I'm afraid

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we'll keep him pretty busy acting as chauffeur. Nally is sure to want to drive around a lot, and there are many pretty places here that we can motor to."

"Neale likes to be busy," said Ruth. "After all, he's a nice boy, rather."

"I rather like him," coolly admitted Agnes. "But there's one thing—he's never silly. He never tries to hold your hand——"

"When you don't want him to!" finished the other sister, with a laugh. "Well, all foolishness aside, we must begin to make our plans for the house party. I do hope everything will go off nicely."

"Oh, I'm sure it will," declared Agnes. "And when——"

She was interrupted by a crash down in the cellar.

"That sounds as if something went off the swinging shelf!" she exclaimed. "Some of Mrs. Mac's preserves——"

"Those men!" cried Ruth.

"What men?"

"The water men who went down some time ago. I forgot all about them. Maybe they stumbled over something in the dark. I'll send Uncle Rufus down to see about it."

Uncle Rufus was summoned from the garage where he had gone to do some polishing on the



car which Neale had left temporarily, to go down town for some part that needed replacing.

"Yes'm, Missie Ruth, what is it, please?" asked the faithful old colored man as he bowed his way in.

"Uncle Rufus, two men from the water department went down into the cellar about an hour ago to see about a leak," explained Ruth. "They must be there yet, for Agnes and I just heard a noise. I wish you'd see if they're all right and haven't broken anything."

"All right, yes'm, missie, I'll look after 'em."

Rufus shuffled away, and the sisters, resuming their talk about the coming party, soon heard him returning, muttering to himself the while. In a moment he appeared before the two girls.

"Did they go, Uncle Rufus?" asked Ruth.

"Yes'm, they done went all right."

"Just now?"

"No'm, they was leavin' when I went down."

"Did they find the leak?"

"'Deed an' I doan know 'bout dat, Miss Ruth. Dey went out in such a hurry when I walked in dat dey didn't say what dey done found."

"Did they break anything, Uncle Rufus?" demanded Agnes.

"No'm, Ah couldn't see dat dey did. De swing shelf—whut yo' spoke 'bout—dat was all right, an' de preserves. I couldn't see whut dey done. But dey sho' was a queer couple!"

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"What do you mean—queer couple?" asked Ruth quickly.

"Well, I means dat dey went off in such a hasty way, an' dey didn't say if dey saw any leak or nuffin'."

"I guess they didn't, or they would have told us to shut off the water," commented Ruth. "As for being queer—certainly they looked like tramps, but I don't suppose men who have to burrow in trenches and sewers all day long can be spick and span. I'm glad there's no leak, however. That will be all, Uncle Rufus."

"Thank-ee, Miss Ruth. I wants to git de automobubble shined up 'fo Mistah Neale gits back," and out he shuffled.

"I hope nothing goes wrong with the water pipes when we have company," remarked Agnes. "It would be very inconvenient."

"Yes, it would. We'll have the plumber come over to make sure there isn't a leak. Those men didn't look any too intelligent. I wonder how they ever got their job."

It was later in the afternoon, when Neale O'Neil came to the house to announce that the car was now in running order again, that Agnes called to him:

"Neale, did you hear anything about a break in the street water main while you were down town?"

"No, I didn't," he answered. "What is it, a

joke? If it is I'll bite. Go on, what's the answer?"

"It isn't a joke," said Ruth, and she detailed the visit of the two strange men.

"Hum," mused Neale. "That's rather odd. There hasn't been any leak up this way or the street gang would have been out. I'll take a look down cellar myself."

He did, with the result that he came up shaking his head.

"What's the matter?" inquired Ruth.

"There isn't a sign of a leak or a break down there," the boy replied. "Those men must have gotten in the wrong house. But I know one of the water commissioners and I'll ask him about it this afternoon. I have to go to the town hall to see about something else."

That evening, when Neale dropped in, as he often did, and Luke had telephoned to say that he and his sister were in town and were going to call, Ruth remembered to ask him about the two strange men.

"Were they from the water department, Neale?" she wanted to know.

"Who, those fakers?" asked the youth.

"Fakers?" repeated Agnes. "Were they——"

"They weren't from the water commissioner's office at all," declared Neale. "He hasn't had any men out for a week looking for leaks, for there

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haven't been any. They were just plain tramps, in my opinion."

"Tramps!" gasped Ruth. "Why should tramps spend so much time in our cellar? Oh, Neale——"

"Maybe they're planning to rob the house!" came in strident tones from Sammy Pinkney, who was sitting in a corner with Dot and Tess. "Maybe they're burglars!"

## CHAPTER IV

### IN A HURRY

DOT KENWAY gave a long-drawn-out cry of "Ohoo-oo-oo!" and clasped her Alice-doll more closely in her arms. Tess looked over her shoulder and snuggled farther back into the corner. Agnes glanced up from a low chair where she was polishing her nails, and Ruth uttered sharply:

"Don't talk nonsense, Sammy!"

"Well," demanded the boy, ready to defend his opinion, "if they weren't burglars, who were they?"

"Stop it, Sammy Pinkney!" demanded Tess. "Don't you see you're scaring Dot?"

"Maybe you're scared, too," suggested Sammy.

"I am not!"

"You are so!"

"I am not!"

"Children!" warned Ruth. "Please be quiet. And, Sammy, don't say such things."

"Well, s'posin' they was the truth?"

"They couldn't be! Those men weren't burglars at all."

"Who were they then?" and Sammy trium-



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phantly waited for the answer. "Neale says they weren't from the water department, and I just know they are burglars and they came in the cellar to look around and see the easiest way to break in to-night."

"Cut it out, young man!" ordered Neale. "They were tramps, very likely, looking for something to eat, and when they couldn't find it they quietly went away. They said they were from the water department because that was the first thing they thought of. Very likely, at the next house, they'll say they're from the fire department."

"That would be funny!" laughed Tess. "Fire and water."

And with her laugh the strain they had all been under when Neale gave the disquieting news, that the strange men were not what they claimed to be, seemed dispelled.

The feeling did not wholly disappear, however, for Agnes said later that she thought there might be a good deal of truth in what Sammy said, and that the men did have some idea they might rob the house.

Dot, too, needed more than a laugh to fully dispel her fears, and this was evidenced a little later when she was observed to be walking around the room, as if looking for something.

"What is it, Dot?" inquired Ruth, glancing at the clock to see if it were time to send Sammy

home and put the smaller children to bed, for Luke and his sister were expected soon.

"I'm looking for a good place to hide my Alice-doll," answered Dot.

"Why don't you take her to bed with you as you always do?" Agnes wanted to know.

"Because those burglars might come in and I don't want them in my room," Dot replied.

"And I don't want them to take my Alice-doll, either."

"Oh, don't be silly!" burst out Agnes.

"'Tisn't silly!" declared Dot. "And Tess is going to hide her doll, too; aren't you, Tess?" She appealed to her sister who, though not as passionately devoted to her dolls as was Dot to Alice, still had some that she cared something about.

"I was going to hide them," confessed Tess.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ruth. "Go to sleep and forget all about the men. They were, as Neale says, just tramps. Uncle Rufus will lock up well, and nothing will disturb you children, or your dolls either. You must go to bed soon."

"Well, I'm going to hide my Alice-doll," declared Dot, and she finally found a place behind the piano that seemed safe.

"If you want me to," said Sammy, with an ingratiating voice, "I could come over and stay all night with you."

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"Thanks, but why should you?" asked Neale, winking one eye at Agnes.

"Well, in case burglars did get in," answered Sammy, "I could shoot off the gun."

"What gun?"

"My father's got a shotgun," went on the boy, "and I could go over home and get it. I could bring Billy Bumps into the house, too! He'd butt the rob—tramps!"

"Don't!" cried Ruth, with a laugh. "We've had enough of the goat in the house for one day!"

"Still, a good healthy goat wouldn't be a bad weapon to turn against a burglar," remarked Neale reflectively. "If Billy Bumps would only go at a midnight visitor in the same manner that he attacked Robbie Foote with the eggs, there'd be less for the police to do."

"Do you want me to get the gun and the goat?" asked Sammy, anxiously.

"Thank you—no!" laughed Ruth. "And, Sammy, I don't want to be impolite, but your mother said to send you home at eight o'clock, and it's five minutes past now."

"Aw, shucks!" exclaimed Sammy. "That ain't late!"

"It is for you," said Ruth kindly. "Run along, Sammy."

"Then you don't want me to fight the burglars with your old goat and pa's gun?"

"Not to-night, thank you."

"And don't bring the alligator over again, either," added Agnes.

Rather reluctantly Sammy prepared to depart, and after Dot and Tess had hidden their dolls and some other choice possessions, they were sent upstairs to bed in care of Mrs. MacCall.

"And don't tell them any Scotch ghost stories," cautioned Ruth. "They're on edge now, as it is, with what that irrepressible Sammy said about burglars."

"Nae, nae! I'll nae tell them anything excitin'," promised the motherly old soul.

"Oh, my!" suddenly exclaimed Agnes, as the door bell rang after Ruth had returned from seeing Sammy off and Dot and Tess upstairs to bed. "Oh!" and she sprang up so abruptly that her nail buffer bounced half-way across the room.

"Well, what's getting into you?" demanded Neale, with a laugh, as he picked up the part of the manicure set and restored it to Agnes, making good an opportunity to hold her hand while Ruth went to see who was at the door, calling back:

"It's probably Luke and Cecile!"

And it was. Ruth led them back into the living-room in time to hear Agnes saying to Neale:

"Stop! Stop it, I say! Aren't you silly!"

Agnes had rather a red face, but if Luke noticed that Neale's hair was a bit tumbled, the young collegian said nothing about it.

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"Oh, we've had such a fright!" exclaimed Agnes, after greeting the visitors.

"Fright?" repeated Cecile, questioningly.

"Yes. Two strange men got in the cellar——"

"Oh, they didn't *get* in at all, in the way you think Agnes means," Ruth was quick to explain.

"I saw them go in," and she told the story, including what Neale had discovered to the effect that the men had told false stories about themselves.

"I dare say it doesn't amount to anything," suggested Luke easily. "And it might well be that some assistant in the water department had engaged two laborers in a hurry and forgot to give them any credentials, or report their names. I wouldn't worry."

"Oh, we aren't," declared Ruth. "We have enough other things to think about. I do hope you two haven't made up your minds definitely that you can't be here for our house party all through its duration. Nally is coming.

"We want you over as often as either of you can make it, at any rate, for we will give several small and early affairs to entertain Nally," she went on, after Cecile and Luke had assured her that neither of them would be able to spend the whole time of Nally's visit with the Corner House girls.

"Aunt Lorena needs me," explained Cecile. "But Professor Keeps is not keeping Luke quite



so busy now, and you will have more of him, I think."

The young people sat about and talked such talk as only young folks indulge in without any harmful after effects, and then they played a game, with more regard to fun than to the strict rules the game called for.

"Well, Neale, I suppose you're getting ready for the grind soon," remarked Luke, after the game and while Ruth gave the word for Linda to bring in some simple refreshments.

"Meaning high school?"

"That's it."

"Yes, I'll be getting back in a few weeks now."

"I do hope you won't be so busy but what you can run our car occasionally," suggested Agnes.

"I'd feel lost without you at the wheel, Neale."

"Oh, I'll be there," he promised.

"We shall have to give Nally a good time," said Ruth, "and I was planning two or three picnics. You'll come, won't you, Cecile?" she asked, but she looked at Luke.

"Yes, if I can. I don't know how much time brother can spare from his work, but——"

"You leave it to brother!" chuckled Luke, with a meaning look at Neale. "I haven't been with Professor Keeps all summer for nothing. I learned more than he thought I did."

The evening passed pleasantly, and when the time came for Neale, Luke and Cecile to depart,

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the two young men insisted on going around the house to make sure all outer doors were securely fastened.

“Oh, it’s silly to think those men could be anything more than unfortunate, ignorant tramps,” insisted Ruth.

“Yes, perhaps,” said Luke in a low voice. “But, my dear—” and how naturally the words came to him—“we mustn’t take any chances.”

And Ruth treasured that “we,” for a long time.

Somewhat to the disappointment of Tess and Dot, and to the expressed chagrin of Sammy, the Corner House was not robbed that night. Not a sight or sound of intruders marred the rest of the girls, and even Dot laughed as she pulled her Alice-doll from behind the piano.

“Well, Agnes,” remarked Ruth, when the household had settled into its usual calm routine, “shall we go down town and see Miss Ann Titus?”

“About our dresses? Oh, I suppose so. But don’t say a word about those two men!”

“Oh, of course not! There is no need of its being known all over the neighborhood, and I know what Ann Titus is as well as you do. Mum is the word, as Neale would say.”

The girls found Miss Titus, as usual, with a mouth full of pins, as she draped a dress on one of the forms in her little house. But even the pins

in her mouth did not prevent the village dress-maker from talking:

“So glad you came in. I have some of the loveliest new patterns and ideas, straight from Paris, my dears! You know they’re wearing fuller and longer skirts now, and——”

“No extreme styles, if you please, Miss Titus,” said Ruth, firmly.

“Oh, I know, my *dear*. You were always so preservative, and I quite apprehend what you mean. At the same time if a dress isn’t the least bit *chick* nowadays, it is sort of pass, don’t you think?”

The girls could hardly keep their faces straight during this mispronunciation of French words and misapplication of English ones. Poor Ann Titus had not formerly been this way, but since a new dressmaker had started a place in Milton, Miss Titus thought it necessary to adopt for herself what she considered a French style, and some of what she thought were their mannerisms, while she had the plate on her door changed from the word “*Dressmaker*,” to the foreign one “*Modes*.”

However, she was a good soul, if gossipy, and as long as Ruth and Agnes knew her failing they were on their guard.

They were in the midst of a discussion over materials and patterns when Ruth, happening to look from an open window near the street, saw two men passing.

“There they are now!” she cried, before she

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thought. She sprang from her chair to go to the door, but her voice carried more plainly than she had intended, and the men, hearing it, looked at her and then started off down the street on the run.

Agnes followed her sister.

“Do you mean those two men who were in our cellar?” she cried.

“Hush! Yes,” whispered Ruth. But Miss Titus had heard.

## CHAPTER V

### VISITORS ARRIVE

THE dressmaker literally "pricked up her ears," for as Agnes told Neale later, they actually seemed to rise on her head as she heard the girls mention the mysterious men.

"What's that?" exclaimed Miss Titus. "Have those men done something?"

"Not that we know of," answered Ruth, making a signal to her sister not to say anything.

"But you seemed so startled on beholding them," went on the dressmaker, "that I should impend it might mean something."

"Oh, nothing at all," Ruth made haste to say, wanting to laugh, but not daring to when Miss Titus used "impend" so incorrectly. "I just thought I had seen them before, but perhaps I was mistaken."

This was true enough. She was not absolutely sure that these were the same men she had seen entering the cellar. But she had a pretty clear conviction that they were, else why should they have made such haste to get away when they heard her voice? Agnes, of course, had not viewed the men—that is, Ruth thought she had



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not—so she could not be expected to remember them.

“Well, of all things—” began Ann Titus, and the girls thought they were going to be made the victims of her gossiping tongue when she unexpectedly swung the suspicions into another channel that suited Ruth and Agnes. For Miss Titus said: “Maybe they’re some of those men from Palm Island who were after turtles. They may have come here to sell turtles or their eggs.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be a bit surprised!” exclaimed Ruth, adapting her mind to Ann Titus’ and again signaling to Agnes to fall in with this new turn of the talk. As a matter of fact, nothing the turtle men could do would have been a surprise to a mind like Ann Titus’. The story of the Corner House girls’ stay on Palm Island was well known in Milton by this time, and the actions of the turtle-fishers had been well spread so that Miss Titus, among others, knew of the doings of those men.

“Well, if they pester you to buy their condiments—rather unpleasant I should think, turtles’ eggs, myself—” said the dressmaker, “why don’t you tell the police?”

“I think we shall,” decided Ruth. “It isn’t really anything at all,” and she tried to make her voice sound casual, for if Miss Titus had the least suspicion of a secret, or something mysterious, she would never rest until she fathomed it

—or thought she had. And, in either case, she would have gossiped about it.

But, fortunately for Ruth and Agnes, she accepted the version of turtle gatherers—a conclusion she herself had leaped at—and because the new dresses were to be something out of the ordinary, there was something else to occupy what little mind Miss Titus had and, in consequence, the incident passed off rather well.

“But I was in mortal terror lest she begin asking a lot of questions we couldn’t very well answer,” said Agnes, when they were on their way home.

“So was I,” admitted Ruth. “And it’s just as well to let her suppose those were turtle gatherers. Everybody in town has been talking about them, and Ann Titus won’t gain many listeners when she begins speaking of them.”

“But they weren’t the turtle men,” said Agnes, laughing. “What do you suppose put that in Ann’s head? But I wish we knew who these two men were.”

“Yes,” agreed Ruth. “I, too, wish I knew who they were.”

“Does it worry you, Ruth?” her sister asked anxiously.

“A little—yes,” the older sister was forced to admit. “Oh, of course I know there’s no danger with Uncle Rufus, Linda and Mrs. MacCall with us; and yet——”

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"Why don't you add Neale and Luke?" inquired Agnes, with a laugh. "They'll be with us—more or less—principally more I hope—until after this house party."

"Well, since you have named them, I am glad they are going to be around," conceded Ruth. "Not that I fear anything will happen, but I don't like the way those men acted. Why, they might be lunatics!"

"They didn't act at all, according to what Uncle Rufus said," retorted Agnes.

"No, and that's just the trouble," went on Ruth. "If they had done something while down cellar—if they had dug up a place to find a leak, if they had tightened the pipes, anything to show that they were what they claimed to be, it wouldn't be so mysterious. But now it looks as if they just went in there, as Sammy said, to look for an easy means of entering the house after dark."

"Ruth Kenway, don't dare say such things!" cried her sister.

"I know it seems a scary thing to say, and perhaps I am foolish for mentioning it," sighed Ruth. "I know I'd shake Sammy if he spoke of it again, but I can't help thinking it, Agnes."

"Do you suppose we had better tell Mr. Howbridge?" asked her sister, pausing at the corner of a street that led to the office of their guardian.

"Gracious, no!" exclaimed Ruth. "He would only laugh at us."

“What are you going to do then?” demanded Agnes. “I hope you aren’t following those two men you saw from Miss Titus’ window! If you are——”

She paused and drew back.

“Of course not!” answered Ruth. “But I’m going to mention it to Neale and Luke.”

Upon inquiry they learned that Cecile had been called home by her aunt, but Luke was still staying with Neale.

Those two youths, however, did not attach much importance to what Ruth told them.

“They might have been the same men,” Neale admitted. “But as long as they haven’t been back in your cellar it doesn’t mean anything. Very likely they are tramps, pretending to look for work. I’ll speak to the policeman whose beat takes in your house.”

“I wish you would,” said Ruth.

There were now busy days at the Corner House. But a few weeks remained of the summer vacation, and the girls wanted to make the most of it, Tess and Dot especially. Nor were Luke and Neale unaware of the flight of the glorious summer time. For though Luke was anxious to complete his college course, and Neale his high-school studies, that he might get in the honored class with Luke, neither youth was so abnormal as to wish for the end of vacation.

“Especially,” remarked Neale to Luke, “when

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we're going to have such good times next week."

"Yes, we do have good times at the Corner House," admitted Luke, looking off in the distance but seeing nothing. "She certainly is a wonderful girl!"

And he sighed.

"She sure is!" agreed Neale.

And he sighed.

But they were not both sighing for the same girl.

The room which Nalbro Hastings was to occupy had been repapered and looked "darling," according to Agnes, who almost wished she had taken it for herself. "And maybe I will after she goes," she added. Mrs. Judy Roach had been at the Corner House nearly every day for a week, helping Mrs. MacCall and Linda get things spick and span in preparation for the house party, and there had been almost endless baking, Mrs. MacCall insisting on making some Scotch scones in honor of the visitors.

Two days before Miss Hastings was expected, Ruth, with a letter in her hand, sought out Agnes.

"Agnes," began Ruth, "I want to consult you about something."

"Don't tell me Nally isn't coming!"

"Oh, no, it isn't that. But we need another boy to make this a successful affair."

"Another boy?" inquired Agnes. "Well, there's Sammy Pinkney."

"Don't be silly! You know what I mean—some one for Nally."

"I thought Luke was supposed to look after her," and Agnes pretended to be busily examining a certain pink nail.

"Not any more than Neale is," retorted Ruth pointedly, to which Agnes added:

"Just let me catch him at it!"

"What I was going to say," went on Ruth, "is that if we had another young man it would even matters up, and when we went out with Neale in the car——"

"Oh, I see!" interrupted Agnes, with a ringing laugh, "six is a half dozen and five isn't. If Cecile was coming we'd need two young men. Well, ask some young man for Nally. You have my permission."

"I have asked somebody," said Ruth calmly.

"You have? Who?" And Agnes sat up with a jerk, her eyes wide open.

"He's a friend of Nally's," went on Ruth. "He lives near her in the Back Bay section and his name is Hal Dent."

"Hurrray for Hal Dent!" cried Agnes, until Ruth, placing her hand over her sister's lips, bade her be silent. "But it's pretty late to be asking visitors," went on Agnes. "He'll never get here in time to trot Nally around if you're only just now writing to him."

"Oh, this is his answer saying he'll come,"



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said Ruth, passing the missive to her sister.

"Well of all things!" drawled Agnes. "Doing all that—inviting a strange young man and never saying a word to me!"

"I wasn't sure he would come," Ruth said. "After I thought it over and remembered to have heard Nally mention this Hal Dent, I thought it best to ask him. I told him Nally was going to spend about two weeks with us, and suggested that he might like to run over. I said we could put him up."

"Did you say put him up, or put up *with* him?" mocked Agnes.

"You know what I mean," said Ruth. "Anyhow, he's coming and we'll have to get another room ready."

"Well, I'm glad he's coming," said Agnes. "It will be another defender for the house when those strange men attempt to break in," and though she laughed gayly there was another reason why she was glad Hal was coming.

Nalbro Hastings was altogether too fascinating to be turned loose into a company where there were three young ladies and but two young men. In other words the "balance of trade," to use a business term, was now more even.

And perhaps Ruth had a thought for herself as well as for Agnes and Neale, since she had seen Luke, more than once, looking admiringly at the Boston girl.

"There, she's as shiny as a new dishpan from the five and ten-cent store!" announced Neale, as he put the finishing touches to the Kenway automobile, two days later.

"And we'd better start," suggested Ruth. "We don't want Nally to have to come up in a taxicab."

"Especially the kind of taxicabs at the Milton station," laughed Agnes. "Will Hal be on the same train?"

"He said he would," Ruth answered.

"I wonder what he's like."

A little later Miss Hastings, followed by the devoted Hal, alighted, the youth burdened with Nally's bag as well as his own.

"Oh, Nally! So glad to see you!"

"It seems an age since we said good-by! How are you?"

"Oh, perfectly fine!" All traces of Nalbro's lisping had vanished.

"You look splendid."

"Like a nectarine!" chimed in Neale.

"Oh, hello, Neale! I didn't see you!" called Nally.

"No, I didn't think you'd recognize me without my mustache!" retorted the high-school lad, with a chuckle.

"I knew I'd be glad to see you," remarked Agnes, "but didn't know until you got here how really and awfully glad I'd be. And this is——?"

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“Oh, Hal, pardon me,” said Nally quickly.  
“Allow me——”

The presentations were made amid laughter, and then the visitors were carried off to the Corner House where, though the girls knew it not, a mystery remained to be solved.

## CHAPTER VI

### WITCHES AND WARLOCKS

THERE were whisperings in the "cubby hole" beneath the front stairs. This was a favorite conspiring place for Tess and Dot, and the two small Kenway girls were even now in that retreat, lowering their voices so they would not be heard by Ruth and Agnes.

But there was small danger of this, for the older Corner House girls were preparing to entertain their two Boston guests that evening by inviting in other friends to meet Nally and Hal.

And, be it known, Tess and Dot were preparing to do some "entertaining" on their own account. Hence the whispers and the hiding away in the cubby hole.

"We'd better tell Sammy about it," suggested Dot. "He'll know best what things to do to s'prise 'em."

"Well, maybe," agreed Tess reluctantly.

"We could borrow Sammy's alligator to make everybody remember about Plam Island," went on Dot.

" 'Tisn't *Plam*—" began Tess, but she stopped,

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for she, as well as the others, had begun to realize that it was of no use to correct Dot in this respect. To her it was "Plam Island," and it always would be so.

"Yes, we can get Sammy's alligator," agreed Tess, falling in with the scheme of her younger sister. "But all it can do is to walk around the room drawing the little cart. Sammy's trained it to do that very well. But there isn't anything very *exciting* about that."

Tess, be it known, liked excitement.

"Well, maybe Sammy can think up some other way to have fun," said Dot. "We'll go ask him, and if they don't let us come in to their old party we'll have one of our own."

"I guess they're not going to let us in," remarked Tess, as they crawled from the dark closet beneath the stairs. "I heard Ruth tell Mrs. Mac to set some places for us up in the playroom. Pooh! It isn't any fun for us to eat ice cream and cake up there all alone when they're having loads and loads of fun down here."

"No, it isn't," agreed Dot. "There, Alice-doll, don't you cry," she added, as she soothed the pretend child she carried in her arms. "You're going to come to the party all right."

"Are you going to take her along over to Sammy's?" inquired Tess.

"Take my Alice-doll? Of course!" cried Dot, for they were now out on the side porch. "You'd

cry, wouldn't you, Alice-doll, if I left you behind?"

"She'll only be in the way, and Sammy doesn't like dolls," went on Tess. Sometimes the solicitude of Dot for the Alice-doll rather got on Tess's nerves—or she would so have expressed it had she been a little older.

"Oh, all right," assented Tess, after a brief pause, "bring her along," and she assumed the resigned air she had sometimes noticed in Agnes when Ruth insisted on something being done in a certain correct way.

"Did bad sister Tess want me to leave you home, Alice-doll?" crooned Dot, as they walked across the street, catercornered, to Sammy's house. "Well, I just wouldn't!"

Tess and Dot found Sammy on his back porch, in the sun, busy feeding bits of meat to the pet alligator.

"Look how big he's getting!" cried the boy proudly. "I guess maybe by next summer he'll be big enough to hitch to my regular express wagon and he can draw me around."

"Oh, that would be scrumptious!" cried Dot, clapping her hands. "Could I ride with you, Sammy?"

"Sure!"

"Hum!" murmured Tess, as she smoothed out her dress. "I think it would look very queer, and maybe you would be arrested."



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"Arrested for what?" scoffed Sammy. "Not for speedin', that's sure. Snapper can't go very fast."

"Well, maybe you'd be arrested for *something*," declared Dot, ready now to agree with Tess. "I don't know what. But it's *something*."

"Maybe she means cruelty to animals, like that Italian banana peddler who was arrested once," suggested Tess.

"Aw, a alligator isn't an animal!" declared Sammy. "Anyhow, I wouldn't be cruel to him. Why, I keep feedin' him meat all the while. He has it easy!"

And certainly the alligator from Palm Island did seem to fare very well in Sammy's care. After he had eaten some of the meat, Snapper was hitched to the little cart and drew it about the porch. Dot was finally persuaded to entrust her Alice-doll to the small wagon, and the girls and Sammy laughed in delight as they saw the alligator pulling her about the porch.

"This is what we came over about," explained Tess, when Snapper was allowed to eat some meat scraps in peace. "There's going to be a party over at our Corner House to-night. There's going to be ice cream and cake and lemonade."

"Oh, boy!" murmured Sammy, rubbing his stomach. "Am I coming?" he suddenly demanded, realizing that, so far, he had not been invited.

"Of course you are," declared Tess. "And we want you to make some fun. Can you do something exciting, Sammy, when that girl from Boston is there, and her fellah?"

"I love to hear her scream," said Dot. "To-day she screamed when she saw a caterpillar on the walk."

"What can you do exciting, Sammy?" eagerly asked Tess.

"He could make a tic-tac and put it on the window," suggested Dot.

"That isn't exciting!" scoffed the boy. "It wouldn't scare even your Aunt Sarah."

"It used to scare me," confessed Dot.

"But we want something new," stipulated Tess. "Can you think of something like—like a ghost, Sammy?"

"Oh, a *ghost*!" shrilly whispered Dot.

"Not a *real* ghost, of course," went on Tess. "There aren't any. But a make-believe ghost, Sammy. Could you make one?"

Sammy thought long and deeply—at least for him. Then he clapped his hands and cried:

"I have it! The very thing!"

"What?" demanded the girls.

Then they put their heads together and whispered.

"Where are the children?" asked Ruth of Agnes, a little later, when they were both down in the kitchen, making arrangements with Mrs. Mac-

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Call and Linda about the serving of refreshments at the little affair that evening. It was the first of some informal gatherings to entertain Nalbro Hastings and Hal Dent.

"The bairns?" repeated the Scotch house-keeper. "I think they have gang awa'."

"Where?" asked Ruth.

"Sammy's hame. Hech! Hech! An' I'm not so sure but what they'll be up to mischief foreby."

"Oh, well, if they're with Sammy they're all right," said Agnes.

"You never can tell," remarked Ruth.

But when she had taken a look, and made sure that the three youngsters were on Sammy's porch, she worried no longer, but devoted herself to the business on hand. However, if she could have heard the plotting and planning, Ruth might have not been so easy in her mind.

Neale stopped the Kenway car on the drive and leaped out, carrying several packages.

"There, I think I have everything," he announced. "Except perhaps rings for the lady-fingers."

"Did you order the ice cream?" asked Ruth.

"It'll be here on the dot!" answered Neale. "And I doubt not a portion of it will be inside our Dot," he added, with a laugh.

"A wretched pun," scoffed Agnes. "If that's a sample of what you are going to work off on us this evening——"

"Oh, I've some a lot better than that!" boasted Neale. "Has Luke been over?" he inquired.

"No," answered Ruth. "And that reminds me—we must ask some one for Cecile."

"Only one person you dare ask for her," laughed Agnes. "Telephone and tell her loving garage man, Gene Barrows, to come, Neale. Maybe he'll bring her over in a car."

"I will," he promised, for the devotion to Cecile of this red-haired, but most excellent, young man was well known, and they had been engaged for some time.

"Well, I guess everything is all ready then," remarked Ruth. "But we had better go over some matters again, Agnes, to make sure."

"Oh, I can't!" cried the younger sister. "I'm sure it will be all right. I'm going riding a little with Neale."

She ran down the porch and took her place beside the high-school lad.

"You don't mind, do you, Ruthie?" she asked pleadingly.

"Oh, no, go ahead. I can manage. Everything is practically done, anyhow. But make sure about the ice cream while you're down town."

"We will," promised Neale.

"Ruth takes everything so seriously," said Agnes, as the car was rolling down the street.

"Yes, she does," admitted Neale. "But maybe it's a good thing. Luke's the same way."

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"They're a good match," assented Agnes, with a mischievous glance at Neale, but when he slid his hand along the seat toward her rosy palm she laughed and, extending a finger, asked:

"Did you see anything of our cow down that way?"

"No. But I see a pretty, saucy girl, and I don't have to look very far, either," retorted Neale, a bit put out. Thereupon Agnes kindly patted his hand that was firm on the steering wheel.

Nally and Hal Dent, who had been strolling afield, came home just before supper time.

"Oh, Ruth, you are going to so much trouble on our account!" protested the Boston girl, when she saw how prettily, if simply, the rooms of the Corner House were arranged.

"I love to do it," Ruth said, and she really did. Giving pleasure to others was her own chief source of happiness.

In the evening the little affair was in full swing. Ruth thought it rather strange that Tess and Dot did not protest more when told that they must have their refreshments served in their play-room upstairs. But they had gained a point in having Sammy invited to the party, and Ruth thought perhaps this accounted for their unnatural submissiveness.

But mischief was brewing.

Linda had been sent up to the room of the

children with sufficiently generous portions of ice cream and cake, and downstairs there was merry talk and laughter.

Suddenly, as Mrs. MacCall was coming down the hall and into the living-room with a tray filled with glasses of lemonade, the Scotch housekeeper was heard to scream.

“Oh!” gasped Ruth and to her mental vision was presented the faces of the two ugly men who had entered the cellar.

Into the room burst Mrs. MacCall, her trembling hands barely able to hold the tray on which the glasses were clattering and tinkling.

“What is it?” demanded Ruth.

“Ghosties! Ghosties!” gasped Mrs. MacCall. “There’s witches an’ warlocks an’ lang-nebbied things abroad the nicht! Hech! Hech!”

Luke sprang forward just in time to catch the tray she was about to drop, and then into the room after the housekeeper came a queer, white object, rolling over and over in a most erratic fashion.



## CHAPTER VII

### LUKE REMEMBERS

“GOODNESS, what is it?” cried Nalbro, and she turned toward Hal, not a very difficult operation as he had been near her all evening.

“Where did it come from, Mrs. MacCall?” asked Ruth, as she observed the object, which looked like an immense white egg, rolling farther and farther into the living-room.

“It was in the hall. Hech! Hech! It’s a ghostie, sure! A witch! A warlock! Lang-nebbied—lang-nebbied!”

“It hasn’t a long nose at all, if that’s what you mean,” declared Agnes, for she was sufficiently familiar with the housekeeper’s Scotch dialect to interpret these words.

“Aye, lassie, mebbly not the noo. But e’er it’il gang awa’——”

“Why, it’s a football!” exclaimed Luke. “A football painted white!”

“So it is,” agreed Neale, for many a blown-up pigskin he had help shove over the goal line.

“Who kicked it in here?” demanded Ruth, but, even as she asked, she began to suspect Sammy, Dot and Tess.

“ ’Twas nae kicket,” asserted Mrs. MacCall, who had sunk trembling into a rocking chair. “ ’Twas nae kicket. But ’twas rollin’ alang by its anesel’.”

And, truly, the white football—ghostly enough alone—was making its way over the floor in a strange fashion, rolling first to one side and then to the other.

“It moves like one of those Mexican beans with a bug inside,” laughed Neale.

“Well, a football was made to kick, and here goes!” cried Luke, advancing toward the pigskin.

“Don’t kick it! Don’t!” cried a voice outside the living-room door, and from the hall in sprang Sammy Pinkney, followed by the giggling Tess and Dot, the latter carrying her Alice-doll.

“Why shouldn’t I kick it, young man?” demanded Luke.

“ ’Cause there’s—now—there’s somethin’ inside,” asserted Sammy.

“What?” was called at him in a chorus.

“My alligator!”

“Alligator!” Again the chorus, but in different-toned voices.

“Yes, I’ll show you.”

Sammy knelt over the white-painted football—for it was that—and began unlacing it to remove the outer cover of pigskin which inclosed the rubber bladder within, as an automobile tire is made of a casing and inner tube.

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And from between the blown-up bladder and the outer skin Sammy lifted his pet Palm Island alligator.

"Sammy Pinkney!" cried Agnes.

"Did you do it on purpose?" demanded Ruth, though she sensed the futility of the question almost as soon as she had propounded it. Sammy seldom did anything without a purpose—good or bad.

"I just put Snapper inside the football after I put some whitewash on it, and——"

Sammy was about to say that Tess and Dot had teased him to do something "exciting," and that this was the outcome of the idea that had come to him during the conference on his porch. But Sammy was, after all, a gentleman in his own way, and one of the articles of his creed was:

"Never tell on another."

Therefore he said:

"Yep! I did it."

But Tess and Dot were not proof against this chivalry and self-sacrifice. Bravely they faced the music.

"I helped blow up the bladder," confessed Tess.

"And I—er—I helped stuff Snapper in, because he was all the time sticking his tail out, and his tail had to go in," admitted Dot.

"Oh, you children!" sighed Ruth, hardly able to refrain from laughing.

“The puir beastie!” came from Mrs. MacCall.  
 “’Tis a wonder he were nae smotherit in there.”

“He had plenty of air—he wasn’t inside the bladder!” explained Sammy. “He was just in the leather part, and there was air he could breathe, ’cause there’s holes for the lace to go through. And I left it loose enough so he could wiggle.”

“Then I wasn’t far out with my guess about the Mexican bean,” said Neale.

Doubtless most of you have seen those queer beans, or seeds, which move so oddly when you place them on the palm of your hand. The movements are caused by an insect, or worm, that has developed from an egg laid within the seed.

“The ’gator wiggled inside the ball, and that caused it to roll over and over in a manner that only a Rugby football can roll,” chuckled Neale.  
 “I give you credit, Sammy!”

“Don’t!” begged Ruth, in a low voice. “He’ll think he’s being praised and he’ll try something else.”

“Well, but you’ve got to give him credit,” insisted Neale. “For it was a clever trick for the kid.”

“Stop it!” commanded Agnes, and she put her hand over his mouth, whereat he pretended to bite her and the two skylarked about the room to the no small annoyance of Ruth.

“It’s a mercy I didna’ drapit the lemonade,”

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said Mrs. MacCall, as she took the tray from the chair where Luke had placed it and began serving the refreshments. "I'll hae a settlement wi ye, syne, Sammy, me lad," she promised, and there was more to this than appeared on the surface.

"Well, I didn't mean any harm," muttered the boy, as he gathered up the alligator and football.

Sammy never did mean harm, and, to tell the truth, his tricks and jokes seldom really harmed any one. Mrs. MacCall had strong nerves, even when she thought she saw "witches, warlocks an' lang-nebbied things," and so she soon recovered her wonted spirits.

Had Sammy, Tess and Dot not already been supplied with their share of the ice cream and cake they might have been punished by being deprived of these dainties. But they must have sensed that something of this order would be put in operation if they played their joke before the refreshments had been passed. So they were saved, though Ruth insisted on her younger sisters going to bed, and, of course, this meant that Sammy would have to go home.

But he did not go willingly, for when he saw that the older boys and girls were settling themselves for an evening of talk, music, and the playing of games, he wistfully inquired:

"Is there anythin' you'd like me to do?"

“Thank you, no, Sammy,” replied Ruth, with sarcastic sweetness. “You have done full and plenty for one evening.”

But Agnes, with ever a soft spot in her heart for the children, slipped Sammy a large piece of chocolate cake, unobserved, as she let him out of the side door to go to his own home.

“And don’t let Dot and Tess lead you into mischief again,” warned Agnes, giggling.

“No’m, thank you,” answered Sammy. The thanks, be it known, were for the cake, not for the well-meant warning.

The Corner House, for some time rather silent and gloomy following the death of Uncle Peter Stower, now rang with laughter and the singing of the merry voices of young people. Certainly it was a jolly crowd that Ruth and Agnes had gathered about them, and Nalbro was very glad she had accepted the invitation. As for Hal—he was always glad to be where Nally was, and Luke and Neale were satisfied with their choices.

Perhaps, just for a moment or two, Ruth and Agnes might have felt some twinges of jealousy, especially when Nalbro offered to do some “second-sight” experiments and offered to tell what a person was thinking of.

To do this, she declared, it was necessary that she hold the hand of the person on whom she was experimenting, and as soon as this was announced



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three eager young men pressed forward, clamoring to be the first subject.

"I think she could just as well have done it some other way, don't you?" asked Agnes of Ruth, when they were getting ready for bed later. "She took a very long time with Luke, I notice, and he asked her to take *both* his hands."

"Oh—it—it didn't mean anything," declared Ruth. "It was all in fun."

"Well, I told Neale what I thought of *him*," said Agnes, the least bit sharply.

"Was that wise?" asked Ruth, quietly.

"I don't care whether it was or not!" came the quick retort. "She is pretty and her clothes are a lot better than ours. I'm never going to Ann Titus again! She has no more style——"

"I think you are tired, Aggie," said Ruth, stroking her sister's head. "And you must remember that Nally is our guest."

"Oh, yes, I know I'm just horrid. But——"

However, the first little affair passed off most successfully, even with the mysterious white football, and when Uncle Rufus was locking up, after Neale and Luke and the others had gone, he chuckled as he said:

"Dish suah am laik ole times when Massa Stower done hab parties his own self."

"They're a gay bonnie lot of lads an' lassies!" said Mrs. MacCall. "Aw, it's a gran' thing to be young!"

"It suah am!" chuckled Uncle Rufus. "An' if I was as spry as dey are I suah would hab tuck after dem cellar men dat day dey wuz heah makin' believe mend a pipe."

"Ye hae na seen them ag'in, hae ye?" asked the housekeeper, quickly, with a startled look down the hall.

"No'm, Miss Mac, I hasn't," replied Uncle Rufus. "But if I does——" And he shook his black fist suggestively as he shuffled off to his own quarters.

Hal and Nalbro smiled at each other across the breakfast table the next morning, and Ruth and Agnes, if they felt any little jealousy against their pretty girl guest, did not show it.

"Did you rest well, Nally?" inquired Ruth.

"Wonderfully!"

"Like a top!" was Hal's description. "And what wild round of gayeties do we indulge in to-day?" he asked, with a grin.

"Nothing very strenuous, I hope," said Miss Hastings, with rather a drawl that she was "affecting," Agnes declared, since her lisp had gone. "But of course I'm ready for anything," she added quickly, lest it be thought she intended to cast a wet blanket on the festivities.

"We planned an auto ride to the Glen," said Ruth. "It's a beautiful place, and we can eat lunch there."

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"Sounds good to me," declared Hal. "Especially that lunch part. I'm with you."

"It will be delightful," said the Boston girl.

"Neale will run the car. He'll be here about ten o'clock," announced Agnes.

"Oh, I think Neale's the dearest boy!" declared Nally.

"What about me?" demanded Hal brazenly.

"Oh, you don't count. You're one of the family!" laughed the Boston girl.

And so with merry quip and laughter the breakfast proceeded.

Luke was to be a member of the auto party that would go to the Glen, and he and Neale arrived at the Corner House together, for Luke was staying with Neale at Con Murphy's. The two lads, with Hal, were about to go out to the garage to see that the car was in readiness when suddenly Ruth, who was looking from the window toward the street, cried:

"There they are again!"

"Who?" demanded Agnes, impressed by something in her sister's voice.

"Those two queer men who were in our cellar! I really believe they are spying on us. They were sneaking around the side entrance. Quick! Luke—Neale—see them!"

"I see them!" exclaimed Neale.

"Those men!" cried Luke, as Ruth pointed to two ragged, shiftless figures hastening down the

street, for they had changed their intentions on seeing Ruth at the window. "Why, I remember them!"

"You remember them!" repeated Ruth. "What do you mean?"

"Tell you later. Come on, Neale, let's see if we can't round them up!" cried Luke, and, without answering Ruth's question, he dashed from the house in pursuit of the mysterious individuals, Neale at his heels.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A FUTILE CHASE

HAL DENT stood for a moment in the room with Ruth, Agnes and Nalbro, looking toward the door through which Luke and Neale had started in pursuit.

"What's this all about?" demanded Hal. "Is this part of the daily morning exercise, or——"

"Don't stop to ask questions, Hal, but run!" advised Nally.

"Run? Why should I run? I don't need the training, and——"

"But don't you understand?" persisted the Back Bay girl. "Ruth knows something about those men—they're burglars or something—and she wants them caught. Go help Luke and Neale!"

"I don't know anything about the men—that's the trouble," voiced Ruth. "But I would like to have them caught to find out about them. This is the third time they have been sneaking around where I was. Once they were in our cellar!"

"Say no more! A detective shall have nothing on me!" cried Hal, and he, too, dashed from the house while the three girls followed more slowly, though none the less eagerly.

Dot and Tess, who had been given their breakfast earlier, in charge of Mrs. MacCall, came out in time to see the start of the pursuit.

"Oh, it's a game they're playing!" cried Dot, hugging her Alice-doll, who always shared breakfast with her. "May we play, Ruth?" she begged.

"We want to have some fun!" added Tess.

"It isn't a game," said Agnes. "Don't ask questions, my dears. There may be trouble."

"Is it some of the men from Plam Island?" Dot inquired.

"No," Ruth replied. "You had better take them back into the house," she added, in a low voice to Mrs. MacCall, and then she raised her voice to say to Hal, who was running toward the rear of the house:

"They didn't go that way!"

"I know it, Ruth," he answered. "But I was going to get out the car. Those men had a good start, from what little I saw, and we can get after them better in the car."

"That's a good idea!" complimented Nalbro, and she felt not a little proud of her Boston cavalier.

"I think it will be best—if he can get the car to run," remarked Ruth, a bit dryly.

"Isn't it like other cars?" Nally wanted to know, somewhat suspicious.

"Not always. Sometimes it takes a notion to start easily, and again Neale will have to 'monkey



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with it,' as he calls it, five or ten minutes before it consents to behave."

"Oh, I do hope it runs!" murmured the Boston girl.

Alas! It was a vain hope. Hal did everything called for in the book of directions, from retarding the spark, turning on the gas and ignition to stepping on the self-starter button, but all that resulted was a humming of the starting motor. There were no welcome explosions in the cylinders.

"What's the matter with this boat?" demanded Hal wrathfully, after he had done several things on his own account in trying to get the machine in motion. He had even tried to turn it over by hand.

"I fancy it hasn't had its bath this morning," dryly remarked Agnes. "Or perhaps it wants a dusting with violet talcum powder."

"Never mind," consoled Ruth. "You aren't the only one it acts that way with, Hal. Sometimes I'm so provoked at it that I could just cry. Then I go off without it and it must feel ashamed of itself. For the next time I step on the button it goes with a hum and a purr like a contented kitten lapping up cream."

"We need a new car—that's what we need!" declared Agnes. "But Guardy is so queer. He——"

"He isn't exactly *queer*," broke in Ruth, coming to the defense of the absent Mr. Howbridge.

"But he insists that we must run on a strict budget system, and we have not yet gotten out of this car the maximum of what it is supposed to deliver before it is ready to be turned in. When that time comes we shall have a new car."

"I wish you'd take this one out and wreck it then, Hal!" said Agnes, a bit vindictively.

"Willingly, my lady, if I could get it out at all," replied the youth, rubbing one hand where he had skinned his knuckles trying to crank the motor.

"Never mind. Perhaps Luke and Neale will catch the men, and then we shall find out all about the secret," suggested Nalbro.

"I hope they do get them!" cried Agnes.

"I'm wondering what it was Luke meant when he said he remembered them," murmured Ruth.

"There was something queer in that."

"Come on—let's go out in the street and see if we can find out anything," suggested Agnes, for when Hal had his inspiration about the car they had followed him to the garage, only to lose time.

The street, down which the two strange men had run, followed by Luke and Neale, was apparently deserted. The girls and Hal strained their eyes for a sight of either the pursuers or their quarry, and then from an upper window of the Corner House came a shrill voice asking:

"Are the engines coming?"

"What engines?" asked Ruth, as she caught

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sight of Tess and Dot leaning from the casement at a dangerous angle. "Get right back in there!" she instantly ordered.

"The fire engines! Are they coming?" went on Tess.

"Fire engines? There isn't any fire!" laughed Agnes. "Though from the way we're running around I haven't a doubt but what the neighbors think so," she added, noting that several curious looks were cast in the direction of the Corner House from residents on either side and across the street.

Then along came Robbie Foote, with a basket of things from Mrs. Kranz, the "delicatessen lady," as Tess always called her.

"Anything the matter?" asked Robbie.

"No, nothing much," answered Ruth, with a warning look at the others, telling them not to go into particulars. "And you'd better hurry around to the kitchen with those eggs," she added. "Mrs. MacCall is waiting for them."

"And don't smash them as you did the others," added Agnes, thinking to so occupy Robbie's mind with this remark as to exclude from it any desire to ask embarrassing questions. In this Agnes succeeded, for the delivery boy cried:

"I didn't bust the eggs! It was the goat, and he wouldn't 'a' done it if the alligator hadn't nipped his tail!"

"Yes, I guess that's right," admitted Agnes.

"But, anyhow, Mrs. MacCall is waiting for you."

"Oh, aw right," mumbled Robbie, with an air of having been unjustly treated.

"There's no use of our waiting out here," remarked Ruth. "We're only exciting remark." If there was one thing more than another Ruth did not like it was to attract attention. "Let's go in and wait for Luke and Neale to come back."

Meanwhile the two boys were not having much success in their pursuit of the strange characters. They had a glimpse of the twain as Ruth had called out about them, and then lost it as they dashed for the street.

"There they go!" Neale had cried, after he and Luke had turned a corner.

For a time they had the two mysterious strangers in view and then the men darted into some side alley, or perhaps into some building, going out a rear entrance and over the back fence. For when Luke and his friend reached the place where they thought they could dart in and find their quarry, there was no trace of the men.

"Guess they've given us the slip," remarked Neale, after they had searched about for some time.

"Looks like it," agreed Luke.

"Anything wrong?" asked a man, who had been watching the two youths.

"Oh, no, not much," answered Luke, in an in-

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different manner. "Just a couple of fellows we wanted to speak to."

"Oh, I thought maybe they had stolen something."

"No," answered Luke, and this was true enough, for nothing had been missed from the Corner House cellar.

"It was just as well not to tell that fellow too much," Luke went on, as he and Neale started back to join the girls.

"That's right."

As they walked into the yard of the Corner House, on the porch of which Ruth, Agnes, Nalbro, and Hal were gathered, the last looked at a patch of red on Luke's left hand.

"Hello," Hal cried. "Did he bite you?" The hand was bleeding.

"What? Oh, that! I hit it against a brick wall and rubbed off some of the skin. It isn't anything."

"I can match you!" chuckled Hal, displaying his bruised knuckles. "Say, what kind of a car is that, anyhow?" and he nodded in the direction of the garage. "Must be a new model. She wouldn't start for me."

"Oh, so that's how it happened!" chuckled Neale. "I guess you forgot to cross your fingers and say 'eenie-meenie-miney-mo' before you stepped on the starter, didn't you?"

"I reckon I did," admitted Hal, with a grin.

"Luke, let me see that cut," demanded Ruth.

"Oh, it isn't anything. I'm not going to have any iodine put on it."

"Yes you are!" she insisted. "And you, too, Hal. Come up to the bathroom right away. There's nothing like treating a cut in time. There's no telling what germs may be in it, and iodine will kill them. Come on."

"Not for me!" answered Hal. "If you have a bit of sticking plaster——"

"The worst thing in the world!" cried Ruth. "Come! I insist! And then, Luke, I want you to tell us what you meant when you said you remembered those men."

"That's so!" exclaimed Neale. "You didn't let out a word about that when we were chasing them."

"We needn't ask if you got them," commented Agnes.

"That's right—they gave us the slip," remarked Luke, ruefully.

He and Hal suffered their hands to be treated with the iodine, and Luke created laughter by pretending to cry when the fluid stung, as it certainly did, for he had rather a deep cut, caused when his hand came in contact with a brick wall as he and Neale swung around a corner in futile pursuit of the strange men.

"Thanks," murmured Hal, when his hand had



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been dressed. "I shall recommend you to the Red Cross, Ruth."

"Oh, Ruth is a dandy little nurse," added Luke. "I can certify to that. You ought to have her hold your hand and rub your head when it aches, Hal."

"Oh, such a pain!" cried Hal, clasping his brow with an assumed agonized look on his face.

"Silly!" murmured Ruth, blushing as she put away the iodine. "And now, if your fever isn't too high," she went on with gentle sarcasm to Luke, "you might tell us what you remembered."

"It isn't much," he said, modestly enough. "However, I'll tell you all about it. As soon as you cried out about those men a little while ago, and I had a glimpse of them—I remember your telling me about the cellar mystery—it at once flashed into my mind that I had seen the fellows before."

"Not in our cellar!" exclaimed Agnes.

"No, for I wasn't here at that time. But it was about two weeks ago, on the train. I'd been to Hamilton on an errand for Professor Keeps, and I happened to occupy a seat directly behind those men. I didn't pay much attention to them until I heard them mention ten thousand dollars."

"Whew!" whistled Hal. "They must be garage men! They're the only fellows who ever have that much money nowadays."

"But is that the only strange thing about them?" asked Ruth.

“No. The men kept on talking, and though I couldn’t hear all they said I caught something about dividing up this ten thousand dollars. Then one of the men—the taller—said: ‘If we let them know it’s there we’ll get nothing.’ The other agreed with this, and then I had to leave the train. But I got a good look at the men, and I’m sure they’re the same fellows Neale and I just chased.”

“Ten thousand dollars!” murmured Agnes.

“I wonder what it means?” murmured Nalbro.

And then, before they could begin a series of surmises, Uncle Rufus shuffled out on the porch where this talk was proceeding and announced:

“De tellyfoam’s been ringin’ its haid off, Miss Ruth, an’ it’s somebody what wants yo’!”

## CHAPTER IX

### OUT OF TUNE

WITH a murmured "excuse me," Ruth arose from where she had been sitting near Luke, and started into the house.

"Maybe it's the police telephoning they have captured the two men!" cried Agnes, who was as much given to looking for excitement, on certain occasions, as was Sammy Pinkney.

"It couldn't be," commented Luke. "The police didn't know the men were wanted. And, as a matter of fact, I don't see that we can make any charges against them."

"Didn't they break into your cellar?" asked Hal, who had not heard all the particulars, or else had forgotten some of them.

"No, they didn't break in," remarked Agnes. "In fact, they went there on invitation, you might say."

"Invitation!" cried Nally. "You don't mean to say you *invited* them in?"

"I believe that's what it is called in law," went on Agnes. She had an idea she was going to study law some day. "Ruth saw the men going into our cellar and she did not forbid them. In fact, she

actually told them to enter—at least, a lawyer would call it that. It's a sort of invitation by inference where you don't forbid a person to enter."

"Well, I never would have let them go in if I hadn't thought they were from the water department," said Ruth, who had come back to the porch in time to hear the latter part of this talk.

"Which they weren't," remarked Neale. "I found out that much!"

"Was the telephone message anything about the men?" asked Agnes.

"No, just Carrie Poole saying she could come to-morrow night."

"That's good."

Carrie Poole was one of a number of girl and boy friends invited to another little gathering in honor of Nalbro and Hal.

"But, Luke, can you tell us any more about those men and their queer talk of ten thousand dollars?" asked Neale.

"Not a thing," answered the collegian. "I thought it queer at the time, and for that reason I noticed the men rather more closely than otherwise I should have done. But, as a matter of fact, I thought perhaps they were talking of some moving picture plot, and so the thing went out of my mind."

"Moving picture plot! What do you mean?" demanded Agnes.

"Well, you know, every one is writing for

the movies nowadays," went on Luke, smiling. "Every fellow in my class has one or more scenarios out, hoping for an acceptance, and on the campus all you hear is continuity, close-up, flash-back and the like. And more than once, in trains, I've overheard conversations something like this: 'Well, we could kill off the man and kidnap the girl.' 'It would be easy to have the house robbed.'"

"One might think some desperate crime was being planned, but all it is, really, is a talk on the plot for a moving picture, or what they hope will turn out to be one. So when I heard these men saying something about ten thousand dollars and about not letting some one know or they wouldn't get anything, for a time I thought they might be writing a moving picture scenario."

"Do you think so now after you've had a second look at them?" asked Neale.

"I certainly do not—especially after the way they ran," answered Luke. "And that makes me suspicious that they were around here for no good purpose. If they had been, they would not have run when they saw that Ruth had noticed them."

"It's just what they did before—the time Agnes and I were in to see Miss Titus," said Ruth. "I do hope it doesn't mean anything! I hope they haven't any designs on the house."

"Nonsense!" laughed Luke, patting her hand which was conveniently near his as they sat to-

gether on the porch. "They're just a couple of tramps—that's all."

"But their talk of ten thousand dollars! Really, I don't know that we ought to go on this little picnic and leave Dot and Tess at home."

"Take them with us," suggested Neale.

"There isn't room in the car."

"I'll come back and get them," offered the good-natured lad; and so it was arranged, though Ruth, after all, admitted that there could be no real danger to her younger sisters with Uncle Rufus, Linda and sturdy Mrs. MacCall in the house.

You may imagine with what delight Tess and Dot received the news that they were to be permitted to go to the picnic. They had been mourning the fact that they were obliged to stay at home, and they had just concocted a scheme of sending over for Sammy Pinkney and his alligator when there was a rift in the dark clouds.

"I'll take my Alice-doll!" cried Dot.

"I'll take Clarissa," decided Tess. "She wears a black dress and I can drop her in the mud and not care." Tess lately had, for some reason unfathomable by Ruth and Agnes, taken to playing with her dolls.

"Alice is going to wear white," said Dot, with a superior air. "White is best for picnics."

"Um!" murmured Tess, who was not so particular.



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Hal followed Luke and Neale out to the garage while the girls finished their preparations for the lunch they were taking to the Glen.

"I'm anxious to see how you start that old boat," remarked Hal, rubbing, tenderly, his bruised knuckles.

"It's easy. All you do is—this." Neale turned the ignition key, stepped on the starter switch, and the steady throb and hum of the motor at once followed.

"You must have it charmed," commented the Boston lad.

"You have to humor 'em," chuckled Neale.

After all, it was not necessary for Neale to make a second trip to take Tess and Dot to the Glen. A neighbor happened to be going out in that direction and volunteered to take the younger girls.

"Coming home we can pile in anyhow," remarked Agnes, "for there won't be so many lunch boxes and baskets."

"You verged dangerously near the truth then," solemnly remarked Luke. "I shall empty at least half a dozen lunch boxes myself."

It was a beautiful day, the Glen was looking its best after a light shower, and there was a "romantic" waterfall among other natural wonders. Nalbro called it romantic, and she ought to have known what that word meant. As for Neale, he said he couldn't see what there was in a waterfall, anyhow.

"As the Irishman said, what's to prevent it from coming down?" he demanded. But no one paid much attention to this ancient joke.

"Now, Tess and Dot," said Ruth, taking her younger sisters off to one side when they had been safely delivered, "I don't want you to give me any trouble to-day."

"We never do," declared Tess.

"You don't mean to, but you do," said Ruth patiently and with a kind smile. "Don't go off by yourselves exploring, and——"

"Well, you don't want us tagging around after you and Luke all day, do you?" asked Tess, though why she should couple the names Ruth said she could not imagine.

"I want you to be within call, if not within sight, all the while," was the stipulation. "There are many little places where you might wander off and be lost. You needn't 'tag' us around, as you call it, but don't get too far away."

"We won't," promised Dot. "Oh, I just love it here and so does my Alice-doll."

Indeed they all seemed bent on having a good time, and when the lunch had been put away until such time as it would be needed they strolled about the Glen, talking and laughing.

As might be expected, there was a pairing off into couples. Agnes and Neale found something to look at down one path, Nalbro and Hal declared

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they wanted to get to the top of the waterfall, and Ruth remarked:

“Well, if they want to tire themselves out by scrambling up there, let them. I think——”

“Here’s a quiet place—a regular bosky dell,” laughed Luke, and he led the way.

And then, for a time, the murmuring talk of the young people mingled with the murmur of the water as it slipped over the mossy, green stones.

It was, as might have been expected, Tess and Dot who put an end to what seemed an ideal period, for Ruth soon heard the voice of Tess calling:

“Where are you? Where are you?”

“Oh, I wonder if anything has happened!” Ruth exclaimed, with a startled glance at Luke, who sat beside her on a mossy bank.

“What’s wrong?” he cried, his stronger voice echoing through the forest.

Back came the unromantic answer:

“We’re hungry!”

“Oh, is it noon?” asked Ruth, looking at her wrist watch, and, finding that it was half-past twelve, she added: “No wonder the poor things are looking for us. We’ll eat!”

“It seems a pity to leave this,” remarked Luke, glancing around on their trysting place.

“Oh, we can come back,” conceded Ruth.

“Thanks,” he said softly.

There was the usual merry ado about setting

out the lunch boxes and baskets, and the usual ants walked, true to form, into the butter and cloyed themselves with sweetness in the sugar. But this is always expected at picnics.

As Neale remarked:

"No outing is complete without them."

But Nalbro rather shuddered when a grasshopper alighted on her slice of bread and threw it quickly away from her with a muttered:

"Ugh! The horrid thing!"

"You don't give him credit!" laughed Luke. "Like the bees to the flowers, he was attracted by your magnetic personality."

"Thank you!" murmured the Boston girl, flashing a look at Luke, who was boldly regarding her. And Agnes, by means of her eyes, telegraphed some message to Ruth.

After lunch, which, if it did nothing more, rendered Tess and Dot less active, for it made them sleepy, there was a period of sitting about, wondering what next to do, for it was too warm for much strenuous exercise.

"Come on!" offered Nalbro suddenly, "I'll tell the boys' fortunes."

"How?" asked Agnes.

"I'll read their hands."

"I'm first!"

"No, I!"

"She came with me!"

In turn Luke, Neale and Hal thus cried as they

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crowded around the fascinating Boston girl—there was no denying that she was fascinating—and pretty, though Agnes, at least, had no lack of beauty and Ruth's sweet face always gave pleasure to a beholder.

"Oh, I can't tell your fortunes all at once. And no one must hear the others'," declared Nally, with a pretty air of bewilderment, as three tanned hands were thrust toward her, each one eager to be first.

"Decide by lot then," suggested Neale.

"How?" asked Nalbro.

"Shut your eyes and take a hand," he went on, and this was done.

The Boston girl, with closed eyes, groped among the three palms held before her, and whether it was accident or design, she took that of Luke.

Then the other two lads, after some protesting, were sent out of hearing while Nalbro proceeded to study and trace the lines in the hand of the young collegian.

What she told him is neither here nor there, nor is what she pretended to prophesy for Neale and Hal. But as she continued to be a center of attraction for the young men, while Agnes and Ruth tidied up the luncheon ground, there were uneasy glances cast in the direction of the fortune-telling section of the Glen.

"Isn't it queer how silly boys are about having

their hands held?" remarked Agnes, with a distinct "sniff."

"She has a certain way about her," admitted Ruth. "Perhaps we should be a little more——"

"Giddy! Silly! Why don't you say it?" challenged Agnes. "I didn't imagine Nally was like that. But you never know a girl until——"

"Hush!" suddenly commanded Ruth. "I thought I heard Tess calling! Yes, she is! Oh, what has happened?"

Through the woods echoed the sobbing voice of a little girl shouting:

"She's fallen in! She's fallen in!"



## CHAPTER X

### A SHOWER

THE little "out of tune" feeling which had begun to manifest itself in the hearts of Ruth and Agnes was instantly dispelled as they heard the voice of Dot crying—for it was Dot they heard.

"What's the matter?" demanded Nalbro, for she was so intent on finishing the telling of Hal's fortune, holding his hand in her warm one, that she had not caught the alarm.

"Something has happened to Tess or Dot—maybe both," gasped Ruth, as she sped past.

"One of them has fallen in the brook, probably," added Agnes, for the waterfall was the result of a small brook toppling down an incline. It was not a wide stream; nor was it deep, except in a few places.

"Come on, Neale!" cried Luke, springing up from a hummock where he was lying under a tree, possibly thinking over the "fortune" that Nalbro had outlined for him. "To the rescue!"

"I don't imagine it amounts to much. Those kids are always falling in or falling out or getting into some sort of trouble," commented Neale. Nevertheless, he followed Luke, and now Nalbro and Hal joined in.

At intervals the cry came from Dot:

“She’s fallen in! She’s fallen in!”

It was by this cry that Ruth, with the others following her, was able to get to the place whence Dot had sounded the alarm. Ruth saw her little sister through a fringe of bushes on the edge of the brook.

“Dot, what is it? Where is Tess?” demanded Ruth, not stopping to inquire whether Tess had fallen in, since it seemed obvious, with Dot there in plain sight, and not wet.

“I don’t know!” sobbed Dot.

“What don’t you know?” demanded Agnes, catching Dot by the arm and giving her a little shake to quiet the hysterical sobbing that was rendering Dot unintelligible.

“I don’t know where Tess is,” Dot sobbed. “She went down there with her Clarissa-doll——” She pointed toward a part of the stream that the boys knew to be deep, and went on: “Then I heard her yell and there was a splash and—— Oh, she’s fallen in, I know she has!”

The boys waited no longer, but dashed away in the direction of the spot Dot had pointed out. Agnes and Nalbro remained to comfort Dot, who was now wiping away her tears on the dress of her Alice-doll, and Ruth followed the boys.

It was Luke who first shouted back some definite news.

“I have found her!” he announced.

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"Is she—is she——" Ruth could not form the words.

"She's all right!" came the reassuring answer. "But she's soaking wet. Tess, come out of that!" he commanded.

By this time the others had pushed through the underbrush and had come upon a scene which, after a moment, brought roars of laughter from Neale and Hal. And Luke, after a glance at Ruth to make sure she was smiling, joined in.

They simply could not help it.

There sat Tess on a flat rock in a shallow place in the middle of the brook and she was washing her doll's dress. The water was flowing down on either side of Tess, as if she might be a rock herself, as she sat there in the midst of the brook.

The stream was up to her waist as she sat down, but she was wetter than this, for she was splashed up to her shoulders, and as she held up the black dress of Clarissa, to see if it needed further scrubbing, water ran from the garment down her freckled face.

"Tess Kenway! What in the world are you doing?" demanded Ruth. "Come right out of there this instant!"

"All right," said Tess calmly. "I guess Clarissa's dress is clean, anyhow."

"Why did you do it? Why are you sitting there?" went on Ruth, for Tess had not yet arisen.

"Did you fall in?" Agnes wanted to know.

"Yes, I did," answered Tess slowly. "And when I was wet I thought I might as well stay in and be wetter and wash Clarissa's dress. It was easier out here, and I found a rock just like a washboard."

"Oh, you terrible child!" scolded Agnes. "You have frightened us all! How did it happen? If it hadn't been for Dot's calling that you had fallen in, we might never have known it."

"Pooh! I was going to tell you, anyhow, so there!" said Tess.

"Yes, but when?" asked Ruth. "Why did you leave Dot?"

"Oh, she wouldn't wash her Alice-doll's dress, and I wanted to wash mine," explained Tess. "So I came down here."

"And left Dot alone? That wasn't kind," commented Ruth. "She heard you fall in."

"She couldn't have."

"Yes, I did, too," declared Dot, for she had been brought along by Nalbro and Agnes to the scene of the immersion. "I heard you splash."

"Pooh! That wasn't me; that was a rock," laughed Tess, shaking her wet hair out of her eyes while Ruth endeavored to wring some water from her skirts. "I was leaning over a rock to wash Clarissa's dress," she proceeded, "and the rock splashed in. I guess that's what you heard," she said to Dot, "because I didn't make any noise—that is, not much—when I slipped in."

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"Then you did fall in?" asked Agnes.

"Yes, I fell in," admitted Tess. "But that was after the rock splashed, and Dot couldn't have heard me. I slipped in and got my feet wet and it felt so nice—and I was wet anyhow—that I waded out and sat down. You ought to see that rock! It's all ribs and crinkles like a regular washboard. If you could take it home, I'll show you where it is!"

She tried to pull away from Ruth as if with the intention of wading out into the stream again, but her sister held her back.

"No, none of that any more!" decided Ruth.

"Oh, but you're a *sight!*" giggled Agnes.

"Pooh! Let 'em dry on me," suggested Tess indifferently. "I've been wet before, lots of times. If you had been here I could have taken Alice-doll's dress out and washed it," she said to Dot.

"I wouldn't have her dress washed. It's clean now. And you can't tell whether your doll's old black dress is clean or not."

"Oh, it's clean," declared Tess. "I sozzled it in the water a lot of times and I rubbed it on the washboard rock."

"Well, you've given us all something of a fright," sighed Ruth. "Though I don't suppose you meant it. Dear me! we haven't anything dry to put on you, though I suppose we might go to some house."

"I'll run her back in the car and let Mrs. Mac-

Call look after her," offered Neale. "I've got to get gasoline, anyhow."

"All right," agreed Ruth, and so Tess had the advantage of getting an extra ride, and all by herself, in the machine with Neale.

"Honestly, it was comical," said Agnes, telling some of her girl friends about it afterward. "In her wet, bedraggled clothes, Tess sat on the rear seat, as prim and stiff as some old-fashioned lady, and she seemed to be pretending that she was some millionaire's wife out in her auto taking the air."

This was just Tess—a queer little body if ever there was one.

"Oh, ye puir bairn!" cried Mrs. MacCall, when she saw Tess. "An' are ye the only one saved?"

"Gracious, you don't think all the rest are drowned, do you?" laughed Neale.

"I was fearin' that," murmured the house-keeper. "I was fearin'."

Tess was soon clothed again in dry garments and she went back to the picnic ground with Neale after he had stopped at the service station to have the gas tank filled.

The day was nearly over—and a glorious one it had been in spite of the accident to Tess—and soon the jolly little party was on the way home, all managing to crowd into the one automobile.

"Oh, I am having such a wonderful time!" sighed Nalbro that evening on the porch, when the



boys had come over for a little talk. "It was darling of you girls to ask me down."

"We are glad you are enjoying it," said Ruth. "And we hope you can stay a long time."

"If it weren't for getting ready to go to boarding school—which means having a lot more frocks made," murmured the Boston girl—"I could stay longer."

"I wish our dressmaker was up to 'frocks,' don't you, Ruth?" Agnes asked, with a half envious sigh. "But poor Miss Titus, though she does have a sign reading 'Modes,' has never risen above a gown—and she used to call everything a dress."

"Sickening—that's what I call it," grunted Neale. "What say you, fellows?"

"Oh, you boys make me tired!" declared Agnes. "You're fussier over one necktie than we are over two dresses! Aren't they, Nally?"

"I should say so!"

And so the merry quips were exchanged.

"Speaking of water," remarked Luke, as he came out with a glass which Ruth had requested him to get, "are you girls going to do anything about those strange men?"

"What can we do?" demanded Ruth. "We don't know who they are, and we aren't even certain that they did anything more than make a mistake."

"It might have been a mistake, getting into your

cellar once," commented Neale. "But when the same men have been seen hanging around the Corner House—well, it's time something was done, in my opinion."

"What would you do?" inquired Ruth. "I have thought of speaking to Mr. Howbridge about it."

"Let me mention it to the police," offered Neale. "I know the chief and all the officers who have this beat—there are different ones on different nights. I'll tell them to keep their eyes open for suspicious characters."

"I wish you would," said Ruth. "And I'll also speak to Mr. Howbridge about it."

"If you girls are nervous," said Luke, speaking particularly for the benefit of Ruth, "I can leave Neale and come over to stay here to-night."

"What? With me on the job? Boy, you are insulting!" cried Hal, in mock heroics. "Why, I'll defy any twain of alleged water inspectors that ever misread a meter!"

"Oh, we're not a bit afraid," said Ruth.

"We have Uncle Rufus and Linda, to say nothing of Mrs. MacCall," added Agnes.

"Well, you can always get Neale and me on the telephone," suggested Luke, with a laugh.

"And by the time you got over here we'd be kidnaped!" declared Agnes. "No, we'll depend on Uncle Rufus."

However, there was no need for any depend-

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ence, for nothing untoward happened that night.

For the next evening a little affair had been planned, to which some guests Nalbro Hastings had not yet met were invited. Ruth and Agnes were busy arranging the details of this, and planning with Mrs. MacCall what the refreshments should be, when Tess came in looking somewhat warm and excited.

"What have you been doing, dear?" asked Ruth, smoothing her hair.

"Oh, Dot and I just now gave Uncle Rufus a shower," explained Tess.

"A shower?" Ruth cried.

"You mean you have been giving one of your dolls a bridal-engagement shower, and you let Uncle Rufus in on some of the things?" questioned Agnes. "It was kind of you, but——"

"No, we gave him a regular shower. Like a showerbath, you know."

"You what?" gasped Ruth.

"That's it. Yes, a shower. Dot's doing it now. I got tired. It's lots of fun! Oh, she wet him good that time! Look!"

She pointed out of the window.

## CHAPTER XI

### A STRANGE SUMMONS

WHAT Ruth and Agnes saw was this. Stretched over the lawn was a hose that had been used for sprinkling the grass. Uncle Rufus, having finished wetting down the dry places, had laid the nozzle end of the hose down, with the water still running, and had walked back to the faucet to shut it off.

But as Ruth and Agnes watched, Dot picked up the nozzle end of the hose, with the water still spurting from it, and directed it toward the old colored man, spraying him well.

"Heah, yo' li'l missie! Stop that!" cried Uncle Rufus.

"Ho! Ho!" Dot laughed, as she continued to spray Uncle Rufus.

Then he made a dash for her, at which sign of danger she dropped the nozzle and ran away, whereat Uncle Rufus resumed his shuffle toward the faucet, perhaps a hundred feet away.

But no sooner was his back turned than Dot again made a rush for the nozzle, again spraying Uncle Rufus.

He shouted and shook his finger at her, but Dot

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only laughed the more and doused him well. But as soon as he started to run toward her she dropped the hose and ran in her turn.

"That's what I was doing, but I got tired," explained Tess. "Oh, we gave Uncle Rufus a fine shower!"

Ruth and Agnes looked at each other. Then Ruth, shaking Tess rather severely by one arm, exclaimed:

"You naughty girls! The idea of wetting poor, old Uncle Rufus! You must be punished for this, Tess. Agnes, go and get Dot and bring her here."

When Dot saw Agnes coming out, the mother of the Alice-doll beat a hasty retreat, not quite fast enough, though, for she was caught as she ran across the lawn and stumbled.

"What's the matter?" demanded Dot. "I wasn't doing it all."

"Ruth will attend to you," remarked Agnes, in her sternest voice. "You and Tess are going to be punished."

And punished they were, though Tess protested, with tears, that Uncle Rufus had on his oldest clothes that he wore when he weeded the garden in the rain, adding that he did not mind being wet.

Really, he did not seem to, though, as a matter of fact, he was pretty well soaked. For when the two little girls had been sent up to bed, to have the shades pulled down, without a toy to play with, not even the Alice-doll, and no picture books to

look at or stories to read, it was Uncle Rufus who interceded for them and begged them off.

"Look heah, Missie Ruth," he humbly pleaded when he had on dry garments, "dem young uns didn't mean no harm, nohow. An'—ha! ha!—I doan mind de wettin'!"

"I know, Uncle Rufus," answered Ruth, with a smile. "It is very good of you to forgive them and to try to get them off, but they did wrong and they must be punished. If I don't do something to them they will act worse the next time."

"Yes'm, Missie Ruth, I knows dat, but I done guess dey has been punished nuff!"

He looked so eager and had such a pleading, loving look on his honest, wrinkled black face, that Ruth could not resist him. She knew how he loved Tess and Dot.

"Very well," Ruth finally said, "I'll let them stay in bed half an hour longer, and then you may go up and tell them that you forgive them, Uncle Rufus, and that they may come down just before supper."

That was perhaps the shortest half hour ever registered on the clock of the Corner House, for it could not have been more than ten minutes after Ruth had remitted the punishment that Uncle Rufus went up to the girls' room and timidly knocked on the door.

"We can't come out," said Tess meekly, in what



she doubtless intended to be a martyr's voice.

"You'd better go away!"

Uncle Rufus gave one of his inimitable chuckles.

"Oh!" gasped Dot.

"Oh!" gasped Tess.

"Yo'-all kin come down now," announced Uncle Rufus.

"Did Ruth say so?" asked Tess.

"Yes'm, she done say dat!" declared Uncle Rufus. "Miss Ruth say she done mitigate yo' punishment, whateber dat means, an' I wants to say dat I forgibs yo'. Ha! Ha! I guess I done needed de baff anyhow."

"Oh, Uncle Rufus, we're awfully sorry if we gave you a bath before it was time," said Dot.

"Doan yo'-all worry none 'bout dat!" chuckled the old colored man. "Come 'long down 'fore supper!"

Tess and Dot, much chastened in spirit, descended. They were grateful that none of the boys were around to see their humiliation, and for a time they went about much subdued, trying to make it appear that they were more sinned against than sinning.

But Ruth knew them, and so did Agnes, for they had done such pranks before and always the same thing followed their just punishment. So, though Nalbro felt sorry for them and was inclined to "mother" them, she was advised against it by the older Corner House girls.

The result was that little attention was paid to Tess and Dot, except that they were treated with exaggerated politeness by their sisters, perhaps in contrast to their rude but thoughtless showering of Uncle Rufus.

In a short time the little girls forgot all about it and were playing about as before, much to the delight of Uncle Rufus, who would not have slept well had he kept on his mind any longer the vision of his little tormentors being punished.

"I just love it here!" declared Nalbro, as they were sitting on the porch, waiting for Linda and Mrs. MacCall to announce the evening meal. "It's so different from my own home. It's stupid there, though it's nice enough. Something always seems to be happening here."

"You're right there!" laughed Ruth.

"And sometimes things don't always happen for the best!" added Agnes.

"I just wonder where they got that idea of spraying Uncle Rufus?" mused Ruth. "I do hope they didn't see it in the movies, for they are sure to mention it if they did, and Mrs. MacCall will say it's a sin and a shame that we ever let them go."

"Yes, that would be a bit awkward," admitted her sister. "But I have a faint suspicion that they must have made it up out of their own heads."

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"Perhaps," agreed Ruth. "I do hope Luke comes to-night," she went on.

This was so unexpected, coming from Ruth, who seldom let anything be known about her liking for the young collegian, that Agnes stared at her sister in some surprise, and even Nalbro raised her pretty eyebrows. Luke had been called away from Milton for several days by Professor Keeps, who had some work for the young man to do.

"Oh, it's just a matter of business!" Ruth made haste to say, as she sensed the underlying meaning her words might have conveyed. "He was going to make inquiries about those two men," she went on. "Do you know, I don't at all like the fact that they have been seen around here so frequently," and there was a worried look on her face.

"Don't start any fretting," advised Agnes. "I don't believe it will amount to anything. But what was Luke going to find out?"

"He was going to see some railroad men he knows—the conductor or brakeman on the train the time he sat behind the men who talked about the ten thousand dollars—and he's going to ask if the railroad men know anything about the fellows."

"Oh, so that's the only reason you're wishing Luke to come this evening—on a matter of *business*! I see! The plot thickens!" mocked Agnes.

"Oh, don't be silly!" advised Ruth, in a small tone of voice.

"Worse and worse!" laughed Agnes. "See her blushes, Nally?"

"Nally, if you side with her," began Ruth, "I'll never——"

But the appearance of Mrs. MacCall with the announcement that the meal was served put an end to what might have proved an embarrassing situation.

Toward the end of the meal Tess and Dot were observed carrying on some secret interchange of ideas.

"Go on—you ask her," urged Dot to Tess.

"You said you would," retorted Tess.

"What is it?" Ruth wanted to know.

The two children looked self-conscious for a moment, and then Dot blurted out:

"Couldn't we stay up for the party a little while to-night?"

"Why, yes, I intended you should—for a little while," replied Ruth. "What made you think you couldn't? Oh, I see! About Uncle Rufus! Oh, that's all forgiven and forgotten."

"And could Sammy be over?" Dot was quick to ask, taking advantage of the unexpected softness on Ruth's part.

"Oh, Sammy! Well, I don't know. I hadn't intended to ask him."

"He's got a new suit of clothes!" burst out Dot, as if that clinched matters. And in the laugh that followed, Ruth said:

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“All right. Have him over for a little while. But mind! He must go home early!”

Tess and Dot would have rushed away before the pudding was served, so anxious were they to convey the welcome news to their prankish partner, but Ruth insisted on the forms of politeness being observed, at any rate, and not until she had given the signal for all to leave were Tess and Dot allowed to depart on their joyous errand.

The young men all came, Luke getting back to Milton just in time to attend. Cecile, too, motored over from Grantham and arrived with her intended, Gene Barrows. So that soon the Corner House was echoing to the merry laughter of happy hearts.

“Dish yeah shore would ‘a’ done Uncle Peter Stower good ef he could ‘a’ heerd dis!” remarked Uncle Rufus, as he helped Mrs. MacCall in the kitchen. “He got kinder ole an’ crusty towards de las’, but he had lots ob pain.”

“’Twould be a marcy were the puir mon able to see a little of the brightness he’s brought about,” agreed the Scotch housekeeper. “But it’s nae gi’en ta any mon to see what gaes on when he’s depart!”

“‘Ceptin’ he turns into a ghost,” Uncle Rufus observed.

“Hech! Hech! Dinna ye start any o’ that talk with the nicht comin’ on!” warned Mrs. MacCall, with a glance over her shoulder.

Ruth could scarcely wait for a chance to get Luke off in a corner by himself to put to him some questions that were troubling her. But when she did she derived little satisfaction.

“About those men—” she began. “Were you able to find out anything, Luke?”

“Nothing worth mentioning,” he replied. “I talked with the conductor of the train I was on when I heard the strange talk, and he didn’t even remember the fellows. Small wonder, when you stop to think how many tickets he has to take up in the course of the day. Then I tackled the brakeman, and had a little better luck.”

“Did he know the men?”

“He didn’t exactly know them,” Luke replied. “But he remembered them when I called them to his mind. Luckily, I had noticed them pretty closely and could give a good description. Perhaps I may turn out to be a detective—who knows?”

“You’ll have to work up a few more details on this case before I’ll give you a certificate and a badge,” said Ruth, with a smile. “But what did the brakeman say?”

“That’s right—stick to the main point,” returned Luke. “Well, he said the men had ridden on the same train a couple of times before, but what their business was or what they talked about, he didn’t know.”

“Were they in the moving picture business?”



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"That he couldn't say. In fact, I didn't mention it," was the collegian's answer. "The more I stop to think of it the less I like that moving picture theory."

"But there must be some explanation of their remark about ten thousand dollars," insisted Ruth. "Ten thousand dollars don't grow on every bush, you know."

"More's the pity," remarked Luke. "If it did I'd be out picking some now. College is frightfully expensive!" he added, with a sigh.

"I'm sure it must be. But you haven't much longer."

"I don't know. When I look ahead to the time when I'll graduate—if I don't flunk out—it seems——"

There came an interruption. Sammy Pinkney, who had been playing in the yard in the bright moonlight with Tess and Dot, came up to the corner of the porch where Ruth and Luke were having this conversation.

"Excuse me," said Sammy, with startling politeness for him, "but some one wants to see you, Ruth."

"Some one to see me, Sammy?"

"Yes'm."

"Who is it, and where is he—or she?"

"It's a he."

"Well, Sammy, why all this mysteriousness?" asked Luke, with a laugh, for there was a queer

air not only about Sammy, but about the two little girls who stood just behind him.

“Who wants to see me, Sammy?” asked Ruth, encouragingly.

“It’s Hop Wong, the Chinaman!” blurted out the boy. “And he wants you to come down to the end of the garden!”

## CHAPTER XII

### A QUEER NOTE

RUTH started up from the porch where she had been sitting in some seclusion with Luke. In other secluded places Agnes and Neale were talking over matters that concerned them, and Hal and Nalbro were similarly engaged.

“Hold on! Where are you going?” asked Luke, as he put a detaining hand on Ruth’s arm.

“I’m going to see Hop Wong. Poor man, probably he’s in trouble. He does work for us sometimes, and at Christmas he brought me the loveliest, cutest little chest of tea—the best I ever drank. He has a quaint little laundry at the end of our street, and——”

“You don’t take this message seriously, do you?” asked Luke, and Ruth could see by the moonlight that he was smiling.

“Take it seriously? Of course I do, Luke. Hop Wong isn’t the kind of Chinese to play jokes; though when he first came here the boys played enough mean jokes on him. But he was patient. Of course, I take it seriously. Maybe some new boys have been annoying him—none of those who know him would bother him,” and Ruth started down the steps.

"Wait a minute!" counseled Luke, with a laugh. "I think this is one of Sammy's tricks," he whispered to the Corner House girl. "We'll see if we can't turn it on Sammy himself."

But Ruth did not take this view of it, and instead of pretending to believe what Sammy had said, which was Luke's intention, she at once "spilled the beans," as Luke said afterward, by blurting out:

"Sammy, you're not joking, are you?"

"Sure not, Ruth!"

"Does Hop Wong really want to see me?"

"Cross my heart he does!" and Sammy quickly performed this childish rite, than which there is no stronger confirmation.

"Did he say what he wanted?" demanded Luke. "And how did he come to send word by you, Sammy? Why didn't he come to the front door, or even the back door, himself?"

"'Cause he was skairt, I guess," was all Sammy could think of.

"Frightened by what?" demanded Luke.

"I dunno. All I know is that Dot and Tess and me was playin' hide and coop at the end of the garden an' Hop Wong comes slidin' along—you know how funny he walks."

"What did he say?" asked Ruth.

"Oh, he talked so funnily Dot and I had to laugh!" put in Tess.

"You shouldn't laugh at the poor man. Think

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how silly you would sound trying to talk Chinese," chided Ruth.

"I can almost talk it. Anyhow, I can say words that sound like it," declared Sammy. "Want to hear me?" he asked hopefully.

"Tell us what Hop Wong said," suggested Luke.

"Oh, he just gibbered away," reported Sammy. "And all I could make out was that he wants to talk to Ruth. He said for me to come and tell her to come down where he was at the end of the garden."

"He said," giggled Tess, "'Tell Missie Luth I wanna spleak her muchy qulick!'" And Tess gave such a good imitation of the funny talk of Hop Wong that even Luke laughed.

"Well, I'll go see what he wants," said Ruth. "I imagine it must be something about his laundry business. Once before he came to me. It was when the man who owns his shop was going to raise the rent to a prohibitive figure. I went to see Mr. Howbridge about it, and he was able to arrange matters so poor Hop Wong didn't have to pay so much. Ever since then Hop thinks I regulate the universe, I guess."

"You do—for some of us," said Luke, as he reached forward and pressed Ruth's hand.

"Silly!" she whispered.

"I hope he gives her some lichi nuts," said Sammy to the two little girls, as they followed

Ruth and Luke to the path that led to the end of the yard. Nothing was said to the other two young couples.

The moon shone brightly on the old-fashioned garden of the Corner House, casting fantastic shadows where the old pavilion stood—the pavilion, vine-covered, where Uncle Peter had spent his last lonely days.

“Where is Hop Wong?” asked Ruth, as they neared the place where Sammy had said the Celestial Kingdom’s citizen was waiting.

“Oh, I guess he’s around here. He was right under the apple tree when I saw him first,” the boy reported.

Then, as they all looked about and saw no slant-eyed figure waiting for them, Sammy raised his voice and called:

“Hop! Oh, Hop Wong! Where are you? Here’s Ruthie!”

There was no answer—just the white, silent moonlight over everything.

“Hop Wong!” called Sammy again. “Ruth Kenway is here.”

“Maybe you’d better say ‘Missie Luth’ like he does,” suggested Tess.

“Hush!” came from her oldest sister.

They waited in silence.

“I guess he’s gone,” said Sammy at length. “Got tired of waitin’, maybe.”



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Luke walked about, peering amid the bushes. Then Dot called:

“What’s that white thing?”

“Where?” demanded Tess. “Don’t you go seeing white things now!”

“It’s on the apple tree,” went on Dot.

They all looked toward the nearest apple tree. Gently fluttering in the night breeze was a piece of paper, caught in the crevice of the apple tree bark. Luke reached for it.

“Guess Hop Wong left your laundry check here,” he said, as he opened a bit of folded paper of the typical Chinese kind and saw on it some marks in very dull black India ink. “It must have been forgotten when the laundry was left at his shop,” Luke went on.

“We haven’t sent him any laundry this week,” declared Ruth. “Are you sure it’s a laundry check?”

Luke looked at it again. Then he started in surprise.

“Why, no!” he exclaimed. “It isn’t a laundry check, and it isn’t written in Chinese characters, as I thought at first! It’s a note to you, Ruth!”

“A note to me, Luke?”

“Well, perhaps not to you exactly. It’s to all of you. Wait, I guess I can read it.”

He stepped from beneath the shadowy apple tree into the stronger moonlight and held up the paper with its black characters. Then he read,

and afterward Ruth perused the queer note which said:

“Korner Hous gals pay Hop Wong 100 dols  
Hop Wong mak grat much money gals.”

For a moment neither Ruth nor Luke spoke. With heads close together they again read the queer note, while Sammy, Tess and Dot stood idly there, rather awed by the strangeness of it all.

“Hum,” murmured Luke, “I wonder if he wrote this himself or got some one to do it for him.”

“Hop Wong can write a little English,” said Ruth. “A very little, as perhaps you have noticed,” she went on to Luke. “He told me once he had gone to a Mission School.”

“Then he should have been taught not to play tricks,” and Luke’s tone was a bit severe.

“Do you think this is a trick, Luke?”

“I’m sure of it! Aren’t you?”

Ruth paused a moment before replying. She again read the note.

“No,” she answered, “I think it is genuine.”

“You mean he isn’t trying to play a joke, perhaps put up to it by some one else?” demanded Luke.

“I think Hop Wong is in earnest,” said Ruth, simply.

“Well,” began Luke, “I—— Let’s take this up and see what the others think,” he said, with a change of thought.

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"Perhaps we'd better look about and see if Hop Wong has really gone," suggested Ruth. "His courage may have failed him at the last moment. See if he's hiding in the bushes. Sammy, please call him again. He seemed to trust you."

But neither hails nor search revealed the Chinese, and after a short period the party returned to the piazza.

"We were just coming to look for you!" exclaimed Nalbro. "Where in the world have you been?" and she and Hal halted on the side path up which came Luke and Ruth.

"We have been—picking cherry blossoms," answered Ruth.

"Cherry blossoms!" echoed Hal.

"I think she has confused Japan and China," remarked Luke, with a laugh.

"This is worse and more of it!" chimed in Agnes, who had come along with Neale. "What's the big idea?" she asked slangily. Ruth disapproved of slang, but Agnes, backed by Neale, liked to use it.

"Hop Wong has been trying to stage a mystery," explained Luke. "Here is the concrete evidence of it. I claim it's a joke, but Ruth takes it seriously."

"Let's see!" demanded Neale, reaching for what Luke had taken for a laundry check.

"Suppose we go into the house where the light is better," suggested Ruth. "And, Sammy, I

don't want to be impolite, but perhaps your mother wants you to go to bed."

"Oh, no'm, she doesn't!" quickly declared the boy. "I asked her an' she said I could stay up late to-night on account of your party."

"Well——" went on Ruth.

"Suppose we keep Sammy here a little while," suggested Luke in a low voice. "It isn't very late and we might need him. I have an idea," he added.

"All right," agreed Ruth, after a quick look at her friend. "You may stay a little longer, Sammy."

"Goodie!" cried Tess and Dot.

The children were not much interested in the odd note—particularly when they saw Linda come in with cake and ice cream. And while Sammy and the small girls were enjoying this feast in one corner of the room, the others gathered under the light to read again the strange message.

What did it mean?

## CHAPTER XIII

### A MIDNIGHT TRYST

THERE could be no question but what the message was from a Chinese. Everything about it indicated that—the paper, the ink, and the peculiar manner in which even the English letters were formed with a brush in its bamboo holder, worked in an upright manner, after the style of Chinese from time immemorial.

“Yes, I guess Hop Wong wrote it all right,” agreed Neale. “But wait a minute. I have one of his laundry checks in my pocket now, and I mustn’t forget to call for my clean shirts. You’re going to have some more parties, aren’t you?” he appealed beseechingly to Ruth and Agnes.

“Oh, I suppose so, silly boy!” laughed Agnes. “But what has that to do with this?”

“A lot, maybe,” declared Neale. “I’ll compare a laundry check that Hop Wong positively gave me with this paper and we’ll see if they are alike.”

“Im pretty sure they will be,” remarked Luke. “Though, after all, it isn’t much of a test.”

“Why not?” demanded Neale.

“Because these Chinese laundrymen get all

their paper and other supplies from the same wholesale house, and the stuff seldom varies. However, it will do no harm to make the comparison."

When the two pieces of paper were placed in conjunction, Neale's laundry check and the strange message left in the apple tree, they were identical, and so was the hue of the ink.

Again Ruth read the message which seemed particularly hers, since the Chinese had sent word to her first that he wanted to see her.

"Korner Hous gals pay Hop Wong 100 dols  
Hop Wong mak grat much money gals."

"What in the world does it mean?" demanded Nalbro, clinging to Hal with a pretty air of proprietorship. "It sounds like a comic opera. What's that one we went to see in Boston, Hal?"

"You mean the Mikado?"

"That was it. Wasn't it lovely? Dear Little Buttercup—" and she hummed the air.

"Only that happened to be Japanese instead of Chinese, and 'Dear Little Buttercup' wasn't in the Mikado at all! That's the only difference," observed Luke, with a grim chuckle.

"Oh, well, the idea is the same," Nalbro asserted. "But what does it mean, anyhow?"

"That's what I'd like to know," said Ruth.

"Isn't it plain?" asked Agnes. "Hop Wong,



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for all his meekness, wants us to pay him a hundred dollars so he'll make a great lot of money."

"That isn't the way I read it," declared Neale.

"What do you make of it?" asked Luke.

"It seems to be a sort of promise," went on Neale as he again studied the note. "Translating—ahem—I'll pretend I'm in high school now, giving a recitation in Latin. Translating, I should say it ought to read like this:

"'If the Corner House girls will pay Hop Wong one hundred dollars, Hop Wong, in return, will make a greater amount of money for the Corner House girls.' That's what it means."

"Well, perhaps," admitted Luke. "I hadn't thought of that."

"But how does he propose to make money for us?" asked Ruth.

"Perhaps by enlarging his laundry," suggested Agnes. "That's it, I'll wager a cookie!"

Neale, who had started toward her, turned aside with a disappointed air.

"I thought you were going to say—kiss!" he sighed.

"There is a time and place for everything!" Agnes told him.

"Go on with your theory, Agnes," begged Luke. "It sounds interesting, to say the least."

"Well, couldn't it be that Hop Wong wants to do more business?" asked the girl. "You

know how those Chinese are. They come over here, start a little place, and then get in a partner who does most of the work. I think Hop Wong wants to expand—to get in a partner—and he needs a hundred dollars to finance it. If we advance it he'll give us a share in his laundry—make us stockholders, perhaps. Fancy being in the Chinese laundry business, Ruth! Wouldn't it be grand?"

"I don't know," and Ruth spoke doubtfully. "If I thought he meant that I'd try to help him get a partner."

"It would be just like your unusual kind spirit," said Luke. "But I am not sure it does mean that. Read it again, Neale, just as it sounds."

Neale read:

"'Korner House gals pay Hop Wong 100 dols——'"

He was stopped by a cry from Dot.

"Oh, don't give him my Alice-doll!" she begged.

"Silly child, what do you mean?" asked Agnes.

"Well, doesn't that Chinaman want a hundred dolls?" asked Dot, tears coming into her eyes. "We haven't got that many—not even Tess and me together. And, anyhow, I won't give that Chinaman my Alice-doll and I don't see why they call 'em Chinamen anyhow, 'cause they aren't

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made of china. But he can't have my Alice-doll!"

"He doesn't want her, Dottie!" explained Ruth. "That's just his way of saying dollars."

"Oh! Are you sure?"

"Certainly she is," put in Agnes. "And, Ruth, if you let these children stay up any later, eating ice cream and cake, they'll be sick to-morrow and you'll have to look after them alone, for Neale and I are going away."

"Oh, are you, indeed?"

"Yes. But, seriously, Tess and Dot ought to go to bed."

Instantly the little ones began begging for a half hour more, but Ruth decided that Agnes, for once, was right, and off to bed they were sent.

"I s'pose that means I've got to go," sighed Sammy.

"Well—" began Ruth, with a look at Luke.

"Wait a minute, Sammy," suggested the collegian. "We must get to the bottom of this," he went on. "And to do so we must have a talk with this Chinese laundryman. Now it would seem that he trusts Sammy, though he may be very fond of you and Agnes, Ruth, for what you have done for him. Are you and Hop Wong good friends, Sammy?"

"Sure we are! I always take my pa's collars there and he gives me those funny lichi nuts—I mean Hop Wong does."

"Then Sammy is the boy to proceed with this," went on Luke.

"What do you mean to do?" Ruth wanted to know.

"I want to send word to Hop Wong to come and explain this note, and I think if Sammy goes to the laundry alone and asks Hop Wong to come here, it will do the trick. If one of us goes, or if all of us go, it will look as though we suspected something. But we can safely send Sammy."

"Will he go?" asked Ruth, half doubtfully.

"Sure I'll go!" declared Sammy. "I'd like to. Maybe he'll give me lichi nuts."

"Oh, forget the nuts!" advised Luke. "This may mean business! Skip along, Sammy, and go in casually. Wait a minute!"

"What's cas-casally?" inquired Sammy.

"I mean as if you just happened in," explained Luke. "But I have a better plan. Can't you send some laundry to be done up?" he appealed to Ruth.

"Yes, I could make up a bundle."

"Please do so. We'll make this seem as natural as possible."

"Will he be open as late as this?" asked Hal.

"Oh, sure!" asserted Sammy. "He's workin' all night, Hop Wong is."

A little later Sammy was dispatched with a bundle of things which needed the peculiar at-

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tention of the Chinese, and then the party of young folks at the Corner House waited.

Sammy came back much more quickly than they expected him. He gave the peculiar check to Ruth and said:

“He wasn’t there.”

“How did you leave the laundry then?” asked Luke.

“Oh, there was another Chink in the place—his partner, I guess. I asked him when Hop Wong would be back, but I couldn’t make out anything he said except ‘Tlhusday.’ I guess he meant Thursday.”

“But surely Hop Wong wouldn’t remain away that long!” said Agnes.

“No, he meant the laundry would be ready then,” suggested Neale. “That’s the first thing a new Chinese learns to say—the days of the week. So you didn’t see any sign of Hop Wong, Sammy?”

“Nope.”

“Maybe one of us had better go,” suggested Hal.

“Guess we had,” agreed Luke. “Come on, we three will stroll down there. Maybe Hop Wong will be back soon.”

But when the three young men reached the steaming laundry, with its peculiar acrid smell, Hop Wong was not in sight. A shuffling, slant-eyed and smiling representative came out from

behind the calico curtains, however, and stretched forth a very clean hand with long nails.

"You got chleck?" he clicked.

"No check," said Luke.

"No lauldly," was the sententious reply.

"We haven't any laundry," went on Luke.

"But listen here, friend, where is Hop Wong?"

"Hop Wong gone."

"When Hop Wong come back?" and Luke tried not to listen to the chuckles of his friends at his vernacular talk.

"Hop Wong clum black mebbly t'mollo."

"Not until to-morrow? But maybe he come back to-night?"

"Maybe. You no glot lauldly?"

It seemed to worry Hop Wong's partner (if such he was) that the visitors had neither laundry to leave nor a check with which to claim shirts and collars.

"No laundry," said Luke again. "I think I'll leave a note for the jolly beggar to call at the Corner House," he said to Neale and Hal. "What do you say?"

"Can he read it after you write it?" asked Neale.

"Oh, I guess so. 'Friend,'" and he turned to the other laundryman, "Hop Wong read let-letter—English letter—not Chinese?" His tone was questioning.

"Oh, shlure! Hop, he lead Englis'!"



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"All right—here goes," and Luke printed with the bamboo brush on a piece of laundry wrapping paper a request in as simple words as he could for Hop Wong to call at the Corner House as soon as he returned.

"There! Give it to Hop Wong as soon as he comes in," said Luke. "Pronto! Quick, you know!"

"Pronto is Spanish—not Chinese," chuckled Neale.

"Oh, well, what is it you say when you want a Chinese to hurry?"

"Chop-chop!" declared Hal.

"All right—chop-chop it is," said Luke. "You give Hop Wong this chop-chop," and he handed the other the message.

"All lite," was the bored answer, and they filed out, leaving Hop Wong's partner gravely trying to read the note which he held upside down.

"I only hope he doesn't think 'chop-chop' means that he's to bring up a bowl of rice and chop sticks," said Neale, as they were on their way back.

"We'll have to trust to luck," replied Luke.

They found the girls eagerly and anxiously awaiting their return.

"Well?" asked Ruth.

They told her what had taken place.

"Then the only thing to do is to wait," observed Agnes.

It seemed a long time, but really it was not more than an hour. Sammy had been sent home and Luke was about to propose that he and Neale and Hal should pay another visit to the laundry, when there came a tapping on the window of the room where they were all sitting. It happened to be the only window that was not raised, for the night was warm.

"What's that?" exclaimed Nalbro, as the tapping on the glass sounded very loud, coming, as it did, after a period of silence.

"Look!" exclaimed Ruth.

She pointed to the casement, and in the light from the room they all saw the face of a Chinese peering at them.

"Hop Wong!" exclaimed Neale. "Hey, you!" he shouted, "come in here and stop playing your tricks!"

But, even as he spoke, the face of Hop Wong faded away and disappeared from sight.

"Well, what do you know about that!" cried Hal.

"After him!" cried Luke.

The three young men dashed from the house, scattering to search for the Chinaman. But he was not to be found anywhere around the house nor in the adjacent garden.

"Well, if he isn't the limit!" exclaimed Luke, in exasperation. "What do you suppose his game is?"

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“Give it up,” remarked Neale. “Maybe he’s hiding in the bushes under the window. We didn’t look there.”

An investigation of the shrubbery, however, failed to disclose any Chinese. But they did see, on the window sill, another note. It was written like the first, on laundry paper.

“Hang the fellow!” chuckled Luke. “He’s as bad at writing notes as Wilkins Micawber. Let’s see what this one says.”

They carried it into the house. There they read this:

“Hop Wong met Korner House gals midlight under boy-pain tree in glarden.”

“Whew!” whistled Neale. “More of the same mystery! Wants the girls to meet him at midnight, does he? Not much!”

## CHAPTER XIV

### SUSPICIONS

RUTH reached over and gently took from Neale's hand the latest bit of correspondence from Hop Wong. She read it slowly.

"What do you think it means?" she asked, of no one in particular.

"He wants you and Agnes to meet him at midnight! Just fancy that!" cried Neale indignantly. "He has nerve! I'll say that much!" He would have said a great deal more, evidently, but Luke intervened.

"I think he must mean 'meet' where he says 'met,' " was the opinion advanced by the young collegian. "You girls have never met him, have you—using the word in its past tense?"

"Never, except perhaps to go occasionally to his laundry," Agnes answered.

"But what's this riddle about a boy-pain tree in 'glarden,' by which, I suppose, he means 'garden'?" asked Hal.

"That is a puzzler—boy-pain tree," mused Neale. "I guess we'd better take it for granted that Hop Wong has suddenly gone crazy and let it go at that."

"No!" exclaimed Luke. "I'm beginning to understand it. You have an apple tree in your garden, haven't you?" he asked Ruth.

"You ought to know—you and Ruth have sat under it often enough!" chuckled Agnes.

"That will do, Aggie. This may be serious," said Ruth rebukingly, but in a quiet voice. "Yes, there is an apple tree," she went on.

"Then that's what Hop Wong means by 'boy-pain' tree," declared Luke.

"Where's the connection?" demanded Neale.

"I see!" exclaimed Hal. "And if you need a dictionary, Neale, to trace the parallel between boys and pain and an apple tree——"

"Oh, now I see!" laughed Neale. "Hop Wong didn't know how to spell apple tree, but he knew the effects of green apples on boys, and he went from cause to effect. Pretty good, that!"

"Do you suppose that's what it is?" asked Nally.

"It would seem so," answered Luke. "Now the question is—do you girls think it worth while to humor him, to meet him in this midnight tryst? You needn't be afraid, if that's what you're thinking of," he went on, as he saw Ruth about to demur. "We boys will all be within call."

"Brave boys!" joked Agnes, and Ruth gave her another warning look.

"What do you think, Luke?" Ruth appealed to her friend. "Would you if you were us?—I

mean Agnes and myself. Of course we won't ask Nally to share the danger."

"Oh, I like *that!*" cried the Boston girl. "Here you invite me to the Corner House, and as soon as a first-class mystery—better than any moving picture—crops up, you want to shut me out! No, indeed! Let me help you keep the tryst. Hop Wong won't know but what I am a regular Corner House girl."

"Yes, I don't suppose three will make any difference," replied Luke. "Hop Wong isn't likely to be fussy about that. Well, will you go? You have about an hour to make up your mind," he went on, as he looked at his watch, noting that it was nearly eleven o'clock.

"Let's consider it a moment," suggested Ruth, and then they talked it all over again from the time Sammy had first summoned them to meet Hop Wong in the garden, through the flight of the Chinese and his response to Luke's note.

"If I only had an inkling of what it's all about," observed Ruth, "I wouldn't mind going. But I can't imagine how Hop Wong can put us in the way of making a great deal of money."

"The big point with him, I imagine," said Neale, "is that he wants a hundred dollars for himself. Maybe after he gets those he thinks he can invest it in a Chinese lottery for you and win the capital prize."

"No, I hardly think that," replied Ruth.



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"Well, we'll take a chance, girls," she decided. "With the boys stationed in the bushes near at hand there can be no danger. We'll see what Hop Wong wants—will you?" and she turned to Nalbro and Agnes.

"I'm game!" announced the Boston girl.

"And far be it from me to be a spoil-sport," declared Agnes. "Come on."

"Don't be in too much of a rush; you have a little time yet," announced Luke. "We'll just scout around the apple tree and seek good places for us to hide. Come on, boys."

He went out with Neale and Hal. Ruth looked at her sister and guest.

"Nervous?" questioned Nalbro.

"No."

"Neither am I! Isn't it thrilling?"

"It may be too much so," said Ruth grimly.

They sat and talked in the now silent Corner House until the boys came back. Mrs. MacCall, Linda, and Uncle Rufus had gone to bed, for Ruth told them she would lock up after the boys had gone home.

"I guess we're all set for the play," announced Luke as he and the other two boys returned. "It lacks a little of midnight, but I fancy Hop Wong will be a little early. We'll go down first and hide ourselves away. Don't worry if you don't see us, for it wouldn't do to show ourselves to the laundryman. But we'll be close to you."

"All right," said Ruth. "We'll follow you in about five minutes."

And at the end of that time, when the three girls went into the garden and walked toward the apple tree, bathed as it was in moonlight, there was not a sign of the boys, not so much as loud breathing. Yet Ruth knew Luke would not fail her.

For several minutes the girls waited under the tree. There was no sound but the night wind. The situation was growing tense, and Agnes said later that it was all she could do to keep from giggling hysterically.

Suddenly there was a hiss coming with fierce energy out of the darkness.

"Oh—a snake!" gasped Nalbro. "I'm going to——"

Whether she was about to announce that she would faint or run no one knew, for a moment later the voice of Hop Wong called:

"Clorner House gals alle lite?"

"Yes, we're here all right, Hop Wong," answered Ruth, in steady tones. "But what does this mean? Why have you asked us out here to meet you? If you are playing any tricks——"

"No, Missie Luth, no tlicks. Hop Wong play no tlicks. I telle you lite away quick."

Out of the moonlight shadows he came, a timid and shrinking figure of a Chinese. Ruth wondered that she had ever had a sense of fear concerning him, he seemed so slight and boyish

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—not much larger, in fact, than Sammy Pinkney.

“Well, Hop Wong, we are here and we’ll listen to what you have to say,” remarked Ruth.

“Hop Wong glad Missie Luth come,” said the laundryman, drawing nearer and standing fully revealed in the silvery radiance under the outermost branches of the tree. “Other Clorner House gals here?” he asked. Hop Wong did not speak as he wrote, exactly.

“Yes, we’re all here,” Ruth told him.

“Alle lite. Now Hop Wong tell. Listen! You give Hop Wong one hund’ed dollals, Hop Wong show you where much money is. You sabby?”

“What do you mean?” demanded Ruth. “Where is this much money you will show us?”

“Ah, flist you give Hop Wong one hund’ed dollals?” he cunningly demanded.

“And if we do give you a hundred dollars will you show us where we can find more than that?” asked Agnes, thinking it wise to show that Ruth was not in supreme authority.

“That what Hop Wong do.”

“But if you know where there is a lot of money, why don’t you go and get it for yourself, and not let us take it?” asked Ruth. “Why don’t you get this big sum yourself, Hop Wong?”

“No can do,” was all he said. “Only Clorner House gals git much money. Hop Wong git one hund’ed dollals. No can do.”

He seemed quite downcast about it, and to the girls he was rather a pathetic figure.

"Why don't you tell us first where this money is, and then let us pay you the hundred dollars if we find it?" asked Agnes. "Don't you trust us, Hop Wong? You have known us long enough to know we are honest and that we'll pay you if we find any such large sum as you tell about. Where is it? Tell us, and if we get it we'll pay you—maybe two hundred dollars."

"No can do," was all Hop Wong said.

Further arguments seemed to be useless, yet Ruth made one more attempt. But when Hop Wong stubbornly, or perhaps uncomprehendingly, repeated:

"No can do! Give Hop Wong one hund'ed dollals."

Ruth exclaimed:

"We'll have to see our guardian about this. We'll have to talk with Mr. Howbridge, our guardian, Hop Wong, and we'll see you later—at your laundry. That is all for to-night."

It was surprising to note the change that came over the Chinese. He appeared to shrink and grow even smaller and terror was clearly manifest on his face.

"No tell! No tell him!" he cried. "No call guard and have Hop Wong alested. No tell! I not bad! Oh! Oh!" and in a perfect wail of fright

he turned and fled, being soon lost among the moonlighted shadows of the garden.

"Oh!" exclaimed Nalbro, in pity.

In an instant the three boys had leaped from their hiding places and had joined the girls, so close and ready were they.

"Shall we take after him?" cried Neale.

"No, the poor fellow is frightened to death now," said Ruth.

"But what happened?" asked Luke. "What did you say to him that made him yell like that and run as if a dragon were chasing him? We couldn't hear all that was said."

"I merely announced that we would have to see our guardian about paying Hop Wong one hundred dollars," stated Ruth. "Then off he ran."

There was silence for a moment and then Luke exclaimed:

"I see! He thought you said you would call the *guard*. Guess he must have thought you had a squad of soldiers on hand. Your use of the word 'guardian' mixed him up. There is something suspicious in this or he wouldn't be so ready to run when he thought you were going to call in the authorities. That's it—Hop Wong is afraid of the law."

And so it seemed. The more they thought about it and talked it over, the more Luke's explanation seemed to fit the conduct of the laundryman.

“Well, no use staying out here any longer,” said Ruth, with a little shiver, for the night dew was chilling. “Let’s go in, or Mrs. Mac will think we’ve been carried off by some ‘lang-nebbied thing.’ ”

They went into the house. Neale and Luke offered to remain all night, but it was not considered necessary with Hal and Uncle Rufus at hand, to say nothing of the strong-armed Linda.

They talked matters over a little longer, all the while growing more and more suspicious of Hop Wong’s conduct, and when Luke and Neale departed it was with the intention of taking serious steps the next day to get at the bottom of the mystery.



## CHAPTER XV

### TESS AND DOT INVESTIGATE

MR. HOWBRIDGE chuckled in silent amusement when Ruth and Agnes paid him a visit at his office the next day and told what had happened.

"What do you think of it?" asked Ruth.

"Not much, my dear. If you want my private and unofficial opinion, I'll say I think very little of it."

"But, Guardy," broke in Agnes, "perhaps we'd better have your official opinion."

"Yes," agreed Ruth, "that's what we came for."

"I can't give you an official opinion until I look further into the matter," he said, growing a bit grave as he saw how much these two Corner House girls were affected by what had taken place. "Let me have the documents in the case," he begged.

"Meaning these laundry checks, as Luke calls them?" asked Ruth.

"Yes. You know we lawyer fellows depend a great deal on documentary evidence. Not that I think I can get much from these, however," he went on, as he looked over Hop Wong's notes.

"What shall we do?" Ruth wanted to know.

"Just nothing for the present," was the lawyer's advice. "Leave it to me. I'll see the official court interpreter whom we always have whenever there is a Chinese case in court, and I'll get him to have a talk with Hop Wong. It is just possible that he may be misunderstood, both in his writings and talk."

"Yes, that's possible," admitted Ruth. "I wouldn't want to do the poor fellow an injustice."

"He seemed to have a guilty conscience," remarked Agnes, with a giggle, as she remembered how Hop Wong had run at the mention of the word guardian.

"Perhaps he isn't the only one," replied Mr. Howbridge, with a smile, looking at several documents on his desk. "We lawyers run across some queer cases. Not to raise your hopes too high, however, I think I wouldn't anticipate too much from what Hop Wong said," he went on. "I mean about a great sum of money coming to you. I handled all of your Uncle Peter's affairs and, as far as I know, his estate is all settled and you have the most of it."

"For which we are duly grateful," said Ruth.

"And we don't hope for nor really want any more," remarked Agnes. "Though if you could see your way clear to letting us have a new car, of course we'd——"

"There you go again!" chuckled the guardian.

"Isn't that a perfectly good car you have now?"

"Oh, it's *good* enough, if you mean it *that* way," sighed Agnes. "But if you could see the look, sometimes, on Nally Hastings' face when she gets in it!"

"Oh, ho! Sets the wind in that quarter?" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge, using one of his favorite expressions. "And don't tell me I should say 'sit,' either!" he hastened to remark, thus forestalling an objection on the part of Ruth, who held that the old adage should be "sits the wind," and not "sets." However, this time she was too anxious over the matter of Hop Wong and the mystery with which he was connected to "start anything," as Neale would have said.

"Well, you go home and be good girls— No, I won't say that for you're always good," joked Mr. Howbridge. "But I'll see about letting you have a new car. I'm going over some of your accounts now, and if I find the balance on the right side——"

"If you don't, perhaps we can get Hop Wong's money," laughed Agnes.

"Don't count your chickens until you hear them coming over the bridge, as Uncle Rufus would say," remarked Ruth. "Well, Mr. Howbridge, we'll leave it to you," and she and Agnes went back to the Corner House.

"Has Hop Wong been around again?" asked Ruth of Mrs. MacCall.

"Not a glint of him, and small pleasure do I have at a sight of the yellow-faced heathen!" exclaimed the Scotch housekeeper.

"Oh, well, don't be too harsh on him," laughed Agnes. "He may be the means of our getting a new car. We certainly need one," and she looked toward the old one which Neale was bringing out of the garage, for they were to take a ride that afternoon.

After lunch there was a merry party on the cool porch of the Corner House. Luke was there, bringing word that he had had a telegram and that his sister and her intended would be unable to get to Milton, as had been planned, in order to accompany them on the little outing.

"And what is the opinion of the learned Mr. Howbridge concerning the collar-cleansing representative of the Celestial Empire?" asked Luke of Ruth.

"Meaning Hop Wong?" asked Neale.

"Yes, my son," replied Luke, with a patronizing air.

"He doesn't attach much importance to it," Ruth answered.

"Same here," voiced Neale.

"I think he's a faker!" exclaimed Hal.

"Well, I don't know but what I shall have to agree with you," said Luke slowly. "I've thought it all over, and I can't see but what it doesn't

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amount to anything. Hop Wong must have been dreaming.”

“Call it a pipe dream,” suggested Neale, with a laugh.

“Oh, do you think he smokes opium?” asked Nalbro, shocked.

“Oh, I guess not. Don’t saddle that on him,” said Luke. “But I didn’t mean that way. I think Hop Wong has been day-dreaming, perhaps, and he may have heard some story about fabulous wealth in the Corner House. You know, before you girls succeeded to Mr. Stower’s estate,” Luke went on, “there was a rumor, so I’ve heard, that he was a sort of miser.”

“We never heard that!” declared Ruth.

“Well, probably it wasn’t spread broadcast,” proceeded Luke. “But I understand there was some talk of it, and I think this is what Hop Wong has gotten hold of and he thinks maybe there is a treasure buried somewhere.”

“Just like that treasure that was found in the album in the attic—the fortune that went to Mrs. Eland and Miss Pepperill,” said Agnes.

“But where, Luke, could this present fortune be buried?” asked Ruth.

“Just nowhere!” chuckled Luke. “It’s all bosh, of course, and that’s why I think Hop Wong is a faker.”

“But what about what was said by those men

on the train?" asked Agnes. "I mean about the ten thousand dollars."

"Oh," murmured Luke. "You mean those men I overheard talking?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe there's any connection between them and Hop Wong. It's all just bunk, if you will excuse my use of a slang term," laughed Luke. "Now let's forget all about it and go riding. It's a glorious day."

Neale and Hal brought around the automobile, and as Nalbro was getting in Agnes could not help saying:

"We were down this morning to see Mr. Howbridge, and he said we could get a new car. I hope it comes before you go home, Nally."

"A new car!" whooped out Neale. "Glory be! Then I won't have to tease this one along much more."

"Oh, Agnes, Mr. Howbridge didn't say for sure we could have one," expostulated Ruth.

"No. But he didn't say we *couldn't*," countered Agnes. "And when he doesn't do that it almost always happens. Anyhow, I'm going to look at some of the new models."

"There's certainly no harm in looking," chuckled Neale. "But I do hope Mr. Howbridge loosens up. If he doesn't we may get stalled out in the country some day and have to be towed in."



"Is this machine as risky as that?" asked Nalbro.

"Nothing of the sort!" declared Luke. "It's perfectly reliable."

With merry quips and laughter the party of young folks started off, leaving Dot and Tess at home to play with Sammy Pinkney.

Now, as it happened, Tess and Dot had overheard more of the talk of their older sisters than Ruth and Agnes were aware of. It was distinctly a case of "little pitchers with big ears," and when the automobile party was well out of the way, Tess with a queer, secretive air about her, led her sister and Sammy to a secluded place around the corner of the house.

"Don't you tell a soul," whispered Tess.

"What's a soul?" asked Sammy.

"It's a person," Tess informed him. "Don't you dare tell anybody, will you?"

"Tell 'em what?" Sammy wanted to know.

"What I'm going to tell you and Dot now."

"All right, I won't tell," promised Sammy.

"Cross your heart!"

This rite was performed rapidly.

"You, too, Dot!"

"Can't I tell even my Alice-doll?"

"Oh, her! Yes. But nobody else! Cross your heart!"

Dot did it for herself and for her doll.

"Now listen," went on Tess, and her voice sank to a lower whisper. "It's in *our cellar!*"

She brought out the last two words with such force that Dot dropped her Alice-doll.

"What's in your cellar?" asked Sammy. "My alligator?"

"No. The ten thousand dollars!" went on Tess, eagerly.

"What ten thousand dollars?" Sammy questioned excitedly.

"The money those men told Luke about on the train and——"

"They didn't tell him about any money," objected Sammy. "It was just that he heard them say it."

"It's the same thing," declared Tess, with a fine disregard for trifles. "The men know about ten thousand dollars in our cellar and so does Hop Wong!"

"He does?" cried Sammy, with wide-open eyes.

"Yes!" went on Tess, with a wise shake of her head. "Now you listen to me, both of you, and don't you breathe it to a soul!"

This was more exciting than any imaginary happening Sammy had ever brought up, not excepting his dramatic one about the Russian wolves.

"There's ten thousand dollars in our cellar," declared Tess. "Those funny men who came pre-

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tending to fix a water pipe were after it, but Uncle Rufus scared them away. Hop Wong knows where it is, but he's scared, too."

"Where 'bouts you s'pose it is?" asked Sammy in a whisper.

"I don't know exactly," answered Tess. "But it's in our cellar and we're going to find it. Come on! We'll go get it now!"

She started toward the slanting, open cellar door. For a moment Sammy and Dot watched her and then, fired by the spirit of what they had heard, the other two children started down into the dark depths, intent on making some explorations.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE STORM

RATHER scary it was, this venturing into the seldom-visited regions beneath Corner House. In fact Tess and Dot never remembered having gone there before unaccompanied by their older sisters. But they were driven by a powerful motive—two motives, in fact.

One was curiosity, than which there is no stronger for a child or animal. The other was the desire to “show off” before the older folks—Ruth, Agnes and the boys.

“Won’t they be surprised when we hand them the ten thousand dollars!” exclaimed Tess, as she led the way down the outside cellar steps.

“Oh, won’t they, just!” agreed Dot.

“Will they give you any of the money?” Sammy asked, somewhat enviously.

“Of course they will,” declared Tess.

“How much?” Sammy inquired.

“Oh, maybe forty dollars,” said Tess, vaguely.

“I’d rather have sixteen,” declared Dot.

“Listen to her!” exclaimed Tess. “She thinks sixteen dollars is more than forty!”

“Ho! Ho!” chuckled the boy.

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"Well, it is!" declared Dot, indignantly. "Look! When you have sixteen dollars you have a one and a six," and on the bottom step, in the dust, she traced the figures. "You have a one and a six," she repeated. "But when you have forty dollars you have only a four and a nothing. So there!"

"Well, forty's more'n sixteen, I know that!" declared Sammy, though he was a little impressed by Dot's logic.

"Come on, let's find the ten thousand dollars first," suggested Tess, foreseeing a long argument if she did not intervene, and the search started at that part of the cellar nearest the outside door.

"There's a lot of places to look," complained Sammy, when the trio had ventured in a little way. "I wonder if it's in a box or a barrel?"

"It's buried—that's where it is," declared Tess.

"Buried?" questioned Dot and Sammy.

"Yes, buried treasure is always buried, else how could they call it buried treasure?" Tess wanted to know, with an affectation of superior wisdom.

"Well, I guess that's right," agreed Sammy. "Buried under the cellar bottom, I s'pose."

"Yes," said Tess. "And we'll have to get a shovel to dig it up."

"Dig up the whole cellar?" cried Sammy.  
"That's a heap of work!"

"Buried treasure always means a lot of digging," Tess calmly informed him. "We'll all help."

"Got to have shovels then," decided Sammy.  
"Well, I'll go get 'em."

He started up out of the cellar.

"I—I guess—maybe we'd better come with you," said Tess, falteringly as she looked at the black depths stretching far, far into the rear of the cellar and thinking of the two men who had claimed to be from the water department. "Maybe you wouldn't know the right kind of shovels to get, Sammy."

"I'll go, too," said Dot. "Maybe I'd better leave my Alice-doll out in the sun," she added, as they tramped back up the steps. "She might catch cold in the damp cellar."

"All right," agreed Tess, though it could be seen she had small sympathy, at least just now, with Dot's doll.

Sammy found a shovel for himself in Uncle Rufus' tool-house and the girls got two smaller ones that they at times used to play with. Thus equipped, they went back down cellar, not attracting the attention of Uncle Rufus or Linda or Mrs. MacCall.

"Well, now let's dig," suggested Sammy.

The cellar of the Corner House was not an up-



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to-date cement one, being, in fact, very old-fashioned and of dirt. But the dirt was packed hard with years of use, and it was no easy matter to dig in it. The children soon found this out.

"This isn't any fun!" complained Dot, after a while.

"We *have* to do it!" insisted Tess. "All treasure hunting is hard work. Isn't it, Sammy?"

"Sure," he agreed, though this was his first attempt.

They dug around a bit more, their hardest efforts, however, not making much of an impression on the well-packed cellar bottom, and at last Tess said:

"I guess we'll have to go where the dirt's softer. They just *couldn't* bury any treasure here."

"Where'll we go?" Dot asked.

"Up there," and Tess pointed to the farthermost depths of the cellar.

"It's dark there—terribly dark," complained Dot. "We can't see to dig."

Tess pondered on this for a moment.

"We'll have to get candles," she decided. "But if we go into the kitchen and take away any candles, Linda'll see us, or Mrs. MacCall, and they'll ask us what we're doing, and——"

"I'll go get my cigar-box lantern," offered Sammy.

"What's that, Sammy?" asked Tess.

"Oh, it's a cigar box with a candle in it," said Sammy. "It's a dandy. I'll get it."

He hurried out of the cellar, and Tess and Dot waited for him up in the open, for the little girls did not like to stay in the gloomy place when they were not busy with their treasure hunting.

Sammy's lantern, manufactured as he had said, out of a cigar box, with a hole cut in the lid and a square of glass set in, was not a half-bad illuminant. It gave fitful gleams down in the cellar, and, not much to the amusement of the children, cast fantastic shadows on the whitewashed walls.

"Now we'll go away back where the dirt is soft and get the buried treasure," said Tess.

And into the gloomy depths the children advanced, rather hesitatingly and with more than one glance back over their shoulders, it is true.

Meanwhile the older Corner House girls and Nally and their boy friends were enjoying themselves on the automobile trip. They went to a summer resort where there was a small lake, and soon were floating about in idle pleasure, a couple in each of three boats.

"Beautiful here, isn't it?" asked Luke of Ruth. The boat was slowly drifting, beneath an overhanging arch of green branches.

"Very," she agreed. "But——"

"But me no buts," he quoted, laughingly. And then, as he noticed that she was rather serious he added: "I'll double the proverbial penny."

"For what?" she asked, hardly comprehending.

"Your thoughts," he answered. "What are you thinking of? May I hope that I am——"

"I don't want to spoil your romance," she broke in laughingly; "but I was really wondering what Tess and Dot were doing. I hope they're all right."

"Why shouldn't they be?"

"Well, that queer Chinese and——"

"Oh, Hop Wong won't bother them. If he comes around I fancy Linda will send him flying."

"It isn't so much him as those two men——"

"Don't give them another thought," advised Luke. "I'm sure they will never come near the Corner House again."

"I wish I could be sure," said Ruth. "I don't want to stay here too long. Somehow—I can't explain it—I have a feeling that something is happening back home!"

"Just nerves," declared Luke. "But if you really want to go back——"

"I'd like to. It is almost time, anyhow, and shortening the outing by an hour or so, if you don't mind——"

"Not at all," Luke hastened to assure her. "We'll go back just as soon as I can round up the others."

"You are very good," murmured Ruth, with a grateful look at him, and she did not too quickly

draw away her hand when Luke stretched his fingers over hers.

"Oh, say! What's the idea? Going back so soon!" expostulated Neale, when he and Agnes were signaled to, and came rowing up to the boat dock. "Why, the day isn't half gone!"

"Ruth thinks we had better get back, and so do I," said Luke quietly. "It looks as though we might have a storm," he went on, "and you know the car wasn't exactly on its best behavior on the way out, old man."

"Oh, I worked the crankiness out of her," declared Neale. But when he saw that Ruth was really in earnest about going back he made no further protest. Nor did Hal nor Nalbro.

Contrary to Luke's partial prediction, the car behaved beautifully, and they were soon on their homeward trip. But the other remark of the collegian—to the effect that a storm was brewing—seemed likely to be borne out. In the west black clouds were gathering.

"We'll be home before it breaks," declared Neale, and he stepped on the accelerator.

"I hope so," murmured Ruth. "Tess and Dot are so careless, and I ought to be on hand if there is a heavy storm."

They sped along right merrily, perhaps a little more subdued than on the outgoing trip, for, after all, anticipation is a bit more romantic than real-

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ization in nearly every case. But they had had a pleasant day.

A few drops of rain were falling as Neale drove the automobile into the yard of Corner House, and the girls hastened up on the porch as he continued on to the garage.

"Where are Tess and Dot?" asked Ruth of Mrs. MacCall, as the Scotch housekeeper came out on the porch.

"Oh, the bairns are down in the cellar."

"In the cellar!" Ruth exclaimed. "Why——"

"It is only the noo that I diskivered it," asserted Mrs. MacCall, lapsing into some of her Scotch. "I warned them to come oop tha once. Then ye came spirin' alang——"

"But what are they doing down in the cellar?" asked Ruth. "I hope they haven't been playing there long. Is Sammy with them?"

"Yes. They're playin' some game, I'll wager. I'll call them ag'in, an'——"

But at that moment a dreadful crash sounded from the direction of the cellar.

"Oh!" cried Ruth. "What has happened?"

"I'll see!" offered Luke, making a dash for the inside cellar stairs.

"I'm with you!" added Hal, for Neale had not come in from the garage.

Anxious, the three girls waited at the head of the stairs. They could see a flickering light down in the blackness.

“Oh, if it should be those men or Hop Wong!” half sobbed Ruth.

But a moment later Luke’s cheery voice, most reassuring in its tone, came floating up.

“It’s all right,” he announced. “They just knocked down a shelf of glass preserve jars. Nobody hurt! Up you go, children!”

A moment later Luke reappeared, carrying Tess, covered with dirt and cobwebs, while Hal followed with Dot in a similar condition. Sammy, with his cigar-box lantern, trailed behind, a woeful figure.

“What in the world have you children been doing?” cried Ruth.

“Digging for buried treasure,” announced Tess, as though that were an everyday occupation. “We haven’t found any yet. And then the shelf fell down and——”

Her words were muffled in a terrific clap of thunder which shook the house. Agnes and Nalbro screamed and covered their ears with their hands while Mrs. MacCall murmured:

“What a terrible storm!”



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE MIDNIGHT NOISE

SILENCE followed the terrific clap of thunder—a silence almost as startling as the noise which had preceded it. And then the rain came down in torrents.

It was as if that awful blast had opened the flood-gates of heaven and let down the waters accumulated there for ages past. A pelting, driving, overwhelming storm it was, punctuated by intermittent flashes of lightning and rumbling thunder.

But, as if that were not enough, the condition of the three children—woebegone, dirty and on the verge of tears—was enough to cause a disturbance.

“What has happened? What is going to happen?” murmured Ruth, for once, at least, feeling that her nerves were going to give way.

It was Agnes who saved the situation. Having gained her own equilibrium, she turned to Nalbro and asked:

“What do you think of the Corner House now? Isn’t it an ideal place? So quiet and restful!”

And as she asked this Dot burst into tears and wails, which made her inquiry seem all the more contrasting.

But Nally let out a peal of jolly laughter and exclaimed:

“I just love it! It’s so different!”

“Yes, it’s different, all right!” chuckled Neale.

“Well, now that we’re at least all here, whole and not in pieces,” said Ruth, “perhaps we can have some explanation of what it is all about—I mean what you children have been doing,” she explained. “First, though, is any one hurt?”

“I ain’t,” declared Sammy Pinkney.

“You shouldn’t say ‘ain’t,’ Sammy,” remarked Tess primly, intent on improving her playmate notwithstanding the noise and confusion all about her.

“I aren’t hurt, but I is scared,” announced Dot.

At this Hal and Luke laughed in glee, at which Dot looked a little hurt. Neale, however, was a great comfort, as usual, for he looked gravely at her and said:

“Never mind, Dotums. Almost any one would be scared.”

“Well, I know something else Sammy shouldn’t do,” said Agnes, after the laughter subsided. “And that is to have that old smelly lantern in here. It’s bad enough when the windows are open, but when they’re all closed it’s terrible. Blow it out, Sammy, do!”

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The candle in the cigar box was making a smudge, and Sammy obligingly extinguished it.

"Now let's have the story," suggested Ruth.

While the storm raged outside the children told how they had conceived the idea of searching in the cellar for buried treasure—the treasure of Hop Wong and the two men.

"But what makes you think there is treasure in our cellar?" asked Ruth.

"Because," was all Tess or Dot would say.

As for Sammy, he only pointed to the girls. This was a case of shifting the blame, it seemed.

By degrees, however, it was drawn out of the trio how Tess had put this and that together, and had, in a way, added what she had overheard concerning the Chinaman and the two tramps. Thus she had arrived at the decision that there must be a store of gold in the cellar of the Corner House. She had then taken Dot and Sammy into her confidence.

"And we dug and dug, but we didn't find any," reported Tess. "We were in the back part of the cellar, where it's awfully dark, when we heard a noise. We ran and we knocked down something that fell on the swinging shelf, and that fell down and——"

"It's a mercy you weren't all cut by the broken glass jars!" exclaimed Ruth. "I suppose the cellar's a sight!" she sighed.

"Oh, it isn't so bad as if the jars had been filled

with fruit," chuckled Luke. "There's a lot of broken glass, it's true, but glass jars are cheap. It might have been worse."

"Indeed, yes, if the children had been hurt," agreed Ruth.

A close inspection showed no damage beyond what soap and water would remedy. Then, as the household settled down to a more normal state of existence, preparations were made for getting supper, and more details of the searching expedition of Tess, Dot and Sammy were drawn out while the storm raged.

"What sort of noise was it you heard that made you run? You said you knocked down something that broke the swinging shelf, didn't you?" asked Ruth, when Mrs. MacCall and Linda were preparing the evening meal.

"Oh, it was just a noise," replied Tess, vaguely.

Ruth's evident idea—evident, at least, to the older ones—was to learn if any attempt had been made by Hop Wong or the two strange men to enter the cellar under cover of the approaching storm.

"But can't you tell me what sort of noise?" persisted Ruth.

"It was—now, it was a noisy noise!" exclaimed Sammy, with a triumphant air.

And he wondered why some of them laughed.

"Never mind, Sammy," said Neale consolingly, "most noises are noisy. And that's the sort of

noise that annoys an oyster, if I remember the joke aright."

"If you get off any more old ones like that," threatened Hal, "we'll sentence you to stand out in the rain and sing a song."

"And it's some rain!" murmured Luke.

Indeed, though the first fury of the storm was over, culminating, it seemed, in that one terrific crack, there was now a steady downpour which seemed likely to last all night.

"Sammy, you'd better stay here to supper," said Ruth, when the meal was nearly ready. "I'll telephone over to your mother to say you're all right."

"Oh, I guess she knows I'm all right," Sammy announced, with cheerful irresponsibility.

"I'll make sure," Ruth declared.

It was still thundering and the lightning was flashing when she approached the instrument.

"Don't go near it!" cried Agnes.

"Why not?" Ruth asked.

"It's always dangerous in a thunder storm to go near a telephone! Keep away!"

But Ruth was one not easily frightened. Though after she had got her connection with the Pinkney house and had relieved his mother's feelings by saying that Sammy would remain where he was for the present, Ruth leaped back as a loud clicking from the telephone indicated some sort of electrical disturbance on the wire.

"There! What did I tell you?" cried Agnes.

"No harm done," Ruth replied.

It was almost time for the meal to be served when Luke arose, took Neale by the arm, and started for the hall, saying:

"Well, we'll bid you young ladies good-evening."

"What?" cried Agnes.

"You aren't going—not in all this storm!" objected Ruth.

"I didn't hear you invite us to supper," returned Luke with a simulated injured air. "And you didn't offer to telephone to Grantham and say I was all right."

"Or to Con Murphy," added Neale, with a serious face.

"Silly!" murmured Ruth. "Of course you boys will stay. Stay all night, if you like. We have plenty of room."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," agreed Neale, looking out of the window, down the panes of which little streams of rain were running. "What say, Luke?"

"I'm with you! It looks like a good imitation of the original flood outside."

"You really would have to go around; you couldn't climb the back fence in this storm. Yes, you'll have to stay," put in Agnes.

"Then we'll have a jolly evening of it!" cried



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Hal. Perhaps he thought three girls to one youth was all out of proportion.

Indeed, now that they were all safe within doors there was no need to worry about the storm. The members of the picnic party congratulated themselves that they had left the lake and grove in time to escape the outburst of the elements.

It was an intermittent sort of storm, and there would be lulls in it when it seemed about to stop. The rain would almost cease and the thunder die away, while the flashes of lightning would hardly be noticeable.

Then, with a suddenness that was appalling, would come a crash of thunder which would shake the house, and the lightning preceding it would crackle and snap on the electric-light wires.

Sometimes the rain would decrease to a mere drizzle, and again it would pelt down as if about to bore through the roof.

But the Corner House was stanch—Uncle Peter Stower had seen to that—and not a drop entered.

Supper was a jollier meal with all the company present, than otherwise would have been the case.

But to storm and conversation alike Sammy Pinkney was seemingly deaf. He paid strict attention to the affair in hand, which affair consisted in getting outside as much food as possible. Neither thunder, lightning nor rain disturbed Sammy.

As Neale observed him clean off plate after

plate, which Linda filled, Agnes' chum could not help remarking:

"Treasure hunting makes you hungry, doesn't it, Sammy?"

"Sure!" Sammy answered, not lifting his eyes from the piece of pie.

"I only hope he isn't made ill," murmured Ruth.

"Doesn't thunder or lightning or something have some effect on food or something?" asked Agnes.

"You're thinking of lightning turning milk sour, I guess," answered Neale.

"Perhaps," agreed Agnes.

After the meal they went into the sitting room and sat about talking, the late treasure-hunt, among other topics, being discussed. Ruth had just gone to the telephone again to tell Mrs. Pinkney that Sammy could remain all night if the storm did not cease when a series of queer happenings began.

The first was a sudden dimming of the electric lights. They had been glowing brightly when, all at once, they went from a white brightness to a dull red in their vacuum globes.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ruth. "I hope we aren't going to be left in darkness. We took out most of the gas. I must see if Linda has any candles."

"I can light my cigar-box lantern," offered Sammy.

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"Thank you—no!" protested Agnes. "I'd rather sit in darkness than be smothered."

"It's only the lightning," said Neale. "The lights always go down when a big flash comes."

As he spoke the lights went dim again, but they all noted that this happened when the storm was comparatively quiet. There was no thunder and no lightning.

"How do you account for that?" asked Nalbro, nervously.

"Trouble in the power house," said Luke promptly.

"Well, maybe," Nally conceded.

The house was comparatively quiet for a while, though the storm kept up, and Ruth had just returned from putting the children to bed—Sammy, to his delight being given a room to himself—when Nalbro called:

"Some one's at the telephone!"

"I didn't hear the bell ring," said Hal.

"No. But listen! Hear that clicking?"

They all heard a peculiar tapping in the receiver, as when one is connected with a "busy" wire.

"Maybe it's off the hook," suggested Luke.

He went to look, and when he came back to report that the instrument was as it should be, they all looked one at the other.

"There it is again!" exclaimed Agnes.

Once more the clicking sounded.

"I'll ask Central what it is," volunteered Neale.

He started toward the instrument, but at that moment there came almost as terrific a crash of thunder as the one that opened the storm.

"Neale!" screamed Agnes. "Keep away from that telephone!"

"There's no danger," he asserted, his voice sounding strangely loud in the quiet that succeeded the booming of the thunder.

Then, again the lights went dim—so low as almost to go out—and there came a gasp of fear even from Ruth.

"Do you suppose the house was struck?" she asked in a whisper of Luke.

"Nonsense! If it had been we'd all know it. Lightning isn't that gentle when it strikes."

At that moment a clock somewhere in the Corner House softly gave the hour of midnight. And almost as if it had been timed for that weird and spookish hour there came, from the cellar, seemingly, a strange sound—a sound of a heavy fall, followed by a moan.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### STRUCK DOWN

Nothing more was needed to increase the nervous tension of the young people in the Corner House, especially of Ruth and Agnes, on whom responsibility rested.

The hurried trip home before the storm, the discovery of the plight of the children, the crash of the broken shelf and the freaks of the storm—all this had added up and piled on with the result that all were keyed to the highest pitch.

And when, on top of this, that weird noise sounded, each and every one gave a nervous start, though the boys, at least, were ashamed of themselves a moment later.

“Did you hear that?” gasped Agnes, the first to recover her startled breath.

“Did we *hear* it?” murmured Nally. “I should say we *did*! What was it?”

“And where was it?” asked Ruth, looking around nervously.

“The Corner House is living strictly up to its reputation of a quiet, homelike family hotel,” joked Luke.

“No, but seriously, that was—something!” de-

clared Neale. He had paused before the last word as if in doubt what name to put to the strange noise.

"It was *something* all right," asserted Luke. "And we've got to find out what it was."

"Locate it first—that would be my suggestion," came from Ruth.

"It was in the cellar!" declared Neale.

"That's what I'd say," remarked Nalbro.

On this point there seemed to be little doubt.

"If it had been in the upper part of the house we'd have heard Mrs. Mac or Linda up and about by now," asserted Ruth. "It was below us here—in the cellar, I'm sure."

"It came right after that clap of thunder," said Nalbro. "At first I thought we'd been struck."

"The rumble of the thunder might have rattled down something in the cellar," suggested Agnes. "I've known it to bring down a stack of tins in the pantry."

"Maybe part of the swinging shelf and some of the glass jars that didn't fall before, took a tumble now," suggested Ruth.

Luke shook his head.

"If you had seen that shelf, after the children had finished with it, you wouldn't say there was anything left to fall," he remarked. "It was a wreck."

"Then what was this noise?" asked Ruth.

"That's what we've got to find out," asserted



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Luke. "I'll go down and find out. Maybe a water pipe burst in real earnest this time," he suggested, with a glance at Ruth.

"Oh, don't say anything now to make me more nervous!" she begged.

"Why does that make you nervous?" Nalbro asked.

"It reminds me of those two horrid men—not that I think they're around now, or Hop Wong either, but——"

"Oh, say! Maybe it is Hop Wong searching for treasure under cover of the storm!" cried Agnes.

"Stop!" commanded Ruth. "If you're going to suggest such things——"

She made a tragic gesture. Usually Ruth was not nervous. Clearly something had occurred to upset her usual poise.

"I only suggested water pipes," remarked Luke, "because I thought maybe this terrific rain might have washed away a drain or something, accounting for the gurgling noise."

"Gurgling noise!" exclaimed Neale. "It was a groan that I heard."

"So did I!" chorused some of the others.

"Well, air and water mingling and going through a pipe will make a groaning noise sometimes," commented Luke.

"If any water going through a pipe made a noise such as we heard—then that pipe and water

had better go on the stage and do a vaudeville turn," declared Neale. "It would bring down the house!"

"Well, we'll soon settle what it is," remarked Luke. "I'm going down cellar. You have lights there, haven't you?" he asked, turning to Ruth. "Can they be switched on from up here?"

"Yes. But you mustn't go down there alone, Luke! Wait until I call Uncle Rufus!"

"Nonsense!" expostulated the young collegian.

Uncle Rufus had gone to bed earlier in the evening before the retirement of Mrs. MacCall and Linda.

"We'll go with him!" offered Neale and Hal.

"One of you boys has got to stay with me, for I'm not going near that cellar!" declared Nalbro.

"Now, wait a minute," said Luke slowly. "This thing—this investigation—must be done aright. I'm going to scout around down the cellar by myself. I can do it better alone. If two of us go, one is sure to think he sees something. He'll call out and attract the attention of the other, perhaps just at a time when a valuable discovery is about to be made. Whereas one, alone, can devote his whole mind to the business in hand. So I'll go down alone and if I find I need help I'll sing out and some of you can follow.

"Neale, you and Hal stay here with the girls. No, Ruth, you are not going!" he added hastily, seeing determination in her eyes. "Burr-r-r-r!

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that was a bad one," he exclaimed, as a vivid flash of lightning was followed almost immediately by a terrific crash of thunder.

"Oh, Luke, I don't want to have you go down in that cellar alone!" begged Ruth.

"Nonsense!" he laughed. "I can do a lot better alone. And if I need help I'll sing out. Don't be afraid."

He patted her hand tenderly, and she did not resent this little caress, given in public as it was. Luke had a masterful way with him.

Suddenly, while they stood there after Luke's decision had been announced, and while they were mentally trying to picture what had taken place in the cellar of the Corner House, the lights again went dim.

"What if the current goes off when you're in the cellar?" suggested Agnes to Luke.

"I'd better have a flashlight, I suppose."

"Take this one," and Neale offered his. "I always carry it when I'm in the car," he added. "They're mighty handy."

Luke accepted the miniature electric torch and started for the kitchen, whence entrance was to be had to the cellar. The others followed him, Ruth pointing out the switch that controlled the cellar lights. It was thrown on and Luke prepared to descend.

"We'll be listening for you," said Neale, to

inspire confidence. "Don't let the bogey-man get you!"

"I won't," laughed Luke, starting down the stairs. "I think it will turn out to be, just as I said, some water gurgling through a drain-pipe. But if I should be——"

Before he could complete the sentence the front doorbell suddenly pealed out its electric warning.

Luke was already half-way down the cellar stairs.

"Goodness! Callers at this time of night!" gasped Agnes.

"Probably some one who wants shelter from the storm," suggested Luke, calling the words from the cellar stairway.

"Agnes, you and Hal go and see who's at the front door, and Neale and I will wait in the kitchen to see what Luke finds," suggested Ruth.

"I'll appoint myself a member of the door committee!" remarked Nalbro. "Unless you want me to stay with you and Neale?" she added, turning to Ruth.

"No, go ahead," Ruth answered.

A dim glow came up from the cellar, showing that the electric lights there were working properly. But Luke did not trust them. He held in his hand, ready, the little electric torch Neale had given him.

Agnes, Nalbro and Hal went to the front door

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to answer the bell, while Ruth and Neale remained in the kitchen.

"He's moving around down there," murmured Neale, for he could see that Ruth was under a nervous strain, and he thought perhaps that a little talk might relieve her.

"Yes," she answered. "I hope he doesn't get cut on the broken glass jars from the swinging shelf. I must tell him. Oh, Luke!" she called down the cellar stairs.

"Yes? What is it?" he asked, his voice showing that he had not yet moved far away from the foot of the flight.

"Be careful of the broken glass."

"I will—thank you."

"See anything yet, old man?" asked Neale.

"No. Not a thing. The outside back cellar door is open, though," he said, "and the rain's coming in there in a regular stream."

"Oh, dear!" murmured Ruth. "I suppose those children left it open when they were treasure-hunting!"

"I'll shut it," volunteered Luke.

Neale and Ruth could hear him moving about below them. Neale was just going to say that perhaps, after all, nothing would develop, that they would have all their fears for nothing, when Agnes, Nalbro and Hal came back from the front door.

"Well?" asked Ruth.

"No one was there!" announced Agnes in a strained voice.

"No one?"

"Not a soul!"

"The street's deserted—a regular rain-swept desert!" remarked Hal.

"That *is* strange," murmured Ruth. "Some one must have rung the bell. I wonder——"

At that moment a cry came from the cellar—a cry that caused them all to start.

It was Luke's voice!

"What's the matter, old man?" called Neale, for the cry had in it something of terror and alarm.

There was no answer.

"We must go to him!" declared Ruth.

Without waiting for any of the others, she darted down the stairs, but Neale was after her in a trice. They saw a dim light in the cellar as they almost fell down the narrow stairs. The light came from the front part of the dark depths, up toward the street.

"Luke! Luke!" called Neale.

"Is anything the matter?" Ruth demanded anxiously.

"Want any help?" asked Hal. "Shall we come down?"

"No, stay up there and watch the front door!" cried Neale, with sudden suspicion. "There's queer work going on here! Watch the front door, Hal!"



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Neale and Ruth caught a glimpse of a dim form moving about the cellar.

“There’s Luke!” cried Neale. “Luke! Luke! What’s wrong? Why did you cry out?” he asked.

There was no answer. But as Neale and Ruth started forward from the cellar stairs they saw Luke struck down by a club in the hands of some one invisible to them. He fell like a log, and the next moment the cellar was plunged into darkness.

## CHAPTER XIX

### DOT'S DISCOVERY

BEYOND a low moan and a gasp Ruth uttered no sound when she saw her dearest friend, Luke Shepard, fall in the dimly lighted cellar, struck down, as he was, by the hand of some one unknown. She and Neale darted forward at the same time to go to the rescue.

It was after this first involuntary rush to help Luke that Neale bethought himself that caution might be needed, so he put out a hand to hold Ruth back and said:

"Maybe we'd better wait a moment."

"Wait? And with Luke hurt? No, never!" cried Ruth. She would have proceeded alone to the spot where Luke was stretched out insensible but that Neale, resolving to fling caution to the winds, hastened ahead of her.

There was no sound in the cellar now save the noise made by Ruth and Neale, and they saw no dim forms flitting about. Luke was lying alone, strangely and ominously quiet.

Outside the rain was still pelting down, though the lightning and thunder was less, but the storm was keeping up.

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“Luke! Luke!” called Neale, as he neared the prostrate body of the young collegian. “Are you much hurt?”

There was no answer, but in the kitchen over his head Neale could hear Agnes, Nalbro and Hal moving about uneasily as they caught the sound of his voice.

“Some one struck him with a club,” murmured Ruth. “Did you see it, Neale?”

“Yes, I saw. We must try to catch the man who did it. He’ll try to get out the rear door, I think.”

“Oh, if he does, we——”

“Let him go!” broke in Neale. “We’ve got to look after Luke.”

By this time those waiting in the kitchen had sensed that something was wrong, for Hal called:

“What’s going on down there? Want any help? We heard a cry——”

“Yes, you’d better come down,” answered Neale. “Just you, Hal. Leave the girls up there. Luke’s been hurt and——”

“We won’t stay up here!” cried Nalbro. “We’re all coming down.”

“You’ll only be in the way!” snapped back Neale, speaking more sharply than he intended to, as he wanted to impress the girls. “We have to carry Luke up the stairs. Don’t crowd down. Come on, Hal!”

By this time Neale and Ruth had reached

Luke's side. The flashlight he carried was still glowing on the cellar floor at his side. By the gleam of this, and by the glimmer of his own torch, Neale saw that Luke bore no apparent injury.

"Luke, old man, do you know us?" called Neale, bending over the form of his friend and gently shaking him. "We're here with you—Ruth and Neale."

Ruth had taken Luke's listless head into her lap, and was smoothing back the hair from the forehead. Then a big bruise was visible.

"That's where he was hit," she whispered.

"Yes," assented Neale.

By this time Hal had reached the scene and he and Neale lifted Luke up, intending to carry him to the kitchen. But now he opened his eyes and said weakly:

"I'm all right. Just a bit stunned—for a—minute. Did you—get—those—fellows?"

"What fellows?" asked Hal quickly, looking about the cellar.

"Some man with a club struck Luke down," explained Neale. "We just saw it—that's all."

Luke's brain, momentarily stunned by the blow, was rapidly clearing. He was firmer on his feet.

"See that those fellows don't get out!" he gasped. "Guard the back door, boys, and then telephone for the police!"

"We're going to take care of you first!" in-

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sisted Neale. "We'll get you upstairs and then we'll look after these fellows. I fancy they have gotten away, anyhow. They wouldn't stay after striking you."

This seemed to be the case, for when Luke had been assisted upstairs and when Neale and Hal, with Uncle Rufus' help, had made an investigation in the cellar no trace of the man who had struck the collegian could be found.

"He must have slipped around past us and gotten out of the back door when Ruth and I were going to Luke," said Neale.

Luke was found not to be badly hurt. He had received only a glancing blow on the side of the head with a wooden club. Had the full force of the blow fallen, serious consequences might have resulted. But, as it was, the blow had little more than a temporary stunning effect.

"Though I expect you'll have a fierce headache in the morning," prophesied Neale.

"If it isn't anything worse than that I ought to be thankful," Luke remarked.

"Tell us all about it," suggested Hal.

But before this there had been the suggestion on the part of the girls that the police be sent for, and an effort had been made to communicate with police headquarters. However, the telephone seemed to be out of order, only a strange crackling and buzzing sound resulting when the receiver was taken down. Then Luke had said:

"Don't call in the police!"

"Why not?" asked Hal.

"Because it will only bring unpleasant notoriety to the Corner House. Let's solve this mystery ourselves."

"It's a mystery all right!" declared Neale.

"Yes," gravely assented Luke, "it is a mystery. The police couldn't get here now in time to do anything, and what evidence is left we can look at as well as they. Since the telephone doesn't work don't bother with the police."

"I could go out and telephone," offered Neale.

"No, let it go. In the morning we'll take a look ourselves," decided Ruth.

And so it was arranged. Then, after some witch-hazel had been rubbed by Ruth on the bump on Luke's head, he told his story:

"You know the first part of it as well as I do," he said to his friends gathered around him at this midnight session in the Corner House. "I was going along carefully, looking for any sign of intruders, when, all at once, I saw what I thought was a shadow moving.

"It was near one of the brick pillars that hold the floor beams, and I know now the shadow must have been caused by a man who was hiding behind this pillar, though I didn't realize this at the time.

"I kept on going. Then I saw another flashlight—I mean another than yours and mine, Neale



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—and a moment later I saw a club raised in the air. Before I could think that it was raised to come down on my head it came down, and I don't remember anything more except that it got black all of a sudden."

"Did you think you were struck by lightning?" asked Hal.

"I don't know what I did think. But what did you and Ruth see, Neale?"

"Not much more than you did, old man. We saw the shadow of the club and a man's arm raised to strike you. But before we could do a thing—or even call out a warning—it was all over."

"The question—or at least one of them—" said Hal, "is what became of the man or men who attacked Luke? Where did they go?"

"They must have slipped past Ruth and me and gotten out the rear outside cellar door," suggested Neale.

"I'm sure no one passed us," asserted Ruth.

"Then the only other way they could have gotten out would be to have come up into the kitchen," declared Neale.

"And I know they didn't do that!" said Agnes.

"Is there any entrance to your cellar that isn't much used—a side door or anything?" asked Luke, turning to Ruth.

"None that I know of," she answered. "Perhaps Uncle Rufus might know."

"'Deed, missie, I doan know ob any," declared the colored man. "De back do' an' de one from de kitchen—das all."

"Well, we'll look into it in the morning," murmured Luke, wearily passing his hand over his head, which was now aching severely.

"You must get right to bed," declared Ruth. "Indeed, I'm not sure but what I'd better send for Dr. Forsyth."

"No, don't," begged Luke. "I'll be all right in the morning."

"It seems silly, I suppose, but I'm almost afraid to go to bed," said Nalbro, with a little shiver.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ruth. "All danger is over now, even danger from the storm. And we have the boys here."

"We'll stay up on guard," offered Hal.

"There will be no need," decided Ruth.

"But with the telephone out of order—" began Nalbro.

"Perhaps it's all right now," suggested Neale. "I'll try it."

Somewhat to the surprise of all of them, Central answered promptly, asking Neale "what number?"

"I just wanted to see if the machine would go," he explained, talking rather as if it were an automobile instead of a telephone. "It was out of order a little while ago," he added.

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"Yes, a number were, on account of the storm," the operator explained.

"Well, with the telephone in order we can go to bed, I guess," Agnes remarked. "Though I would like to know who rang our front doorbell and ran away."

"Perhaps the lightning did that, too," said Luke, with a somewhat wan smile.

"Maybe," agreed Ruth. "And now don't talk any more, Luke; get up to bed. Uncle Rufus will help you."

"Oh, I'm not as much knocked out as all that, Ruth."

But he was weaker than he thought and staggered a bit as he started for the stairs, so he was rather glad of the assisting arm of the old colored servant.

Gradually the wonted silence of the night settled over the Corner House and there was peace and quietness following the outburst of the storm and the other disturbances. But to Ruth, sleepless for a long time, it seemed that some strange mystery overshadowed the old mansion which overlooked the Milton Parade Ground.

In the morning Luke was almost himself again, and soon after breakfast he proposed an examination of the cellar. Sammy and the younger girls were told only as much of the affairs of the night before as would explain why the others were so interested in searching the basement.

"Are you looking for the treasure?" asked Dot.

"No, just for traces of two tramps who got in here during the storm last night, my dear," explained Ruth.

"We'll help," offered Tess, and at intervals the younger Corner House girls poked into the dark corners of the cellar.

The investigations of any of them amounted to nothing. Beyond a few places where the dirt cellar bottom appeared to have been dug up—and it was not certain but what Sammy and the little girls had done this—there was nothing unusual to be seen.

"Not even a secret door," lamented Neale, who rather hoped to find this.

"I guess the man who struck Luke was just a tramp who came into the cellar to get out of the rain," suggested Hal. "And when he thought he was going to be caught he struck out and ran."

It seemed this explanation was the only one that would hold.

"But there is still Hop Wong to be accounted for," observed Agnes.

"He's a faker, pure and simple," declared Luke.

"Maybe—and maybe not," returned the fly-away sister glibly.

At this moment Dot, who had persuaded Sammy

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to let her take the precious cigar-box lantern, went into a far and dark corner of the cellar to make further search. Suddenly an excited cry came from her.

“Oh, I’ve found something! I’ve found it! Come quick! Look!” shrieked the littlest Corner House girl.

## CHAPTER XX

### HOP WONG IS CAUGHT

THE others, rushing toward her, found Dot standing near a barrel, flashing upon it the rays from Sammy's cigar-box lantern.

"What is it, Dot?" asked Ruth. She and the others had been about to give up exploration of the cellar, since nothing had developed. "What have you found and where is it?"

"I don't know what it is," Dot answered, "but it's in that barrel. It's a— Oh, listen! It's a noise!" she finally told them.

"A noise!" cried Agnes. "Is that all?"

"Many things start with a noise," remarked Ruth. "In fact, this whole affair started from a noise in the cellar. Stand back, Dot, and let us see what it is."

With a more powerful light than Sammy's improvised lantern, Luke leaned over and peered into the upright barrel. Grouped behind him the others waited anxiously.

Suddenly Luke laughed, and this relieved the strain under which the older ones, at least, were laboring.

"Yes, Dot's found something all right!" chuckled Luke.



"Oh, do tell us what it is!" begged Nalbro.

"A batch of kittens!" laughed Luke. "Sandyface has gone and done it again. She's raising another family!"

And that is what Dot had found—just a batch of Sandyface's kittens in the barrel.

"Mew!" plaintively called the mother cat, as she saw so many faces peering into her privacy.

"You poor thing!" said Ruth. "Well, we won't bother you. Only don't bring them all up into the parlor at once, as you did on a former occasion."

"Did she?" asked Nalbro, to whom Sandyface was rather a new acquaintance.

"She did," asserted Agnes, with a laugh, "and just when the minister was calling. Oh, it was funny, but Ruthie didn't see the fun."

"The minister took it good-naturedly," said Ruth. "No, children, you can't bring the kittens upstairs!" she decided, for Tess and Sammy, having heard of Dot's discovery, were eager to carry the kittens into the light of day.

"Oh, just for a little while!" pleaded Tess.

"No, not even for a little while. Wait until they get older."

"But they're so cute!" pleaded Dot.

"No!" and Ruth was firm about it.

"I'll carry 'em up, and I won't spill 'em!" offered Sammy.

"Children, go right upstairs!" ordered Ruth, and they thought it best to obey.

"And so, after all, we haven't found out anything," remarked Agnes, as they all trailed up after the youngsters. "The mystery is as deep as ever."

"Yes," agreed Ruth. "And I don't know what we are going to do about it. I think we ought at least to tell Mr. Howbridge—that is, if you think we shouldn't notify the police?" she said to Luke.

"Tell your guardian, by all means," he quickly agreed. "As for the police, I don't see what they could do at this time. If they had been here when that fellow gave me a blow over the head with his club they might have gotten after him. But as for picking up clues on a cold trail, I don't believe they can do it as well as we can."

"Not so well," declared Neale. "And what I propose is that we start now and make a systematic search of this whole house, including the cellar, to see if there is any treasure hidden in it."

"You seem to side with the children," observed Hal.

"Well, I think there is something queer around here," asserted Neale. "Those men didn't come in to inspect water pipes without an object. That Chinese didn't write those queer notes for nothing. What it's all about we have to find out."

"Go down and tell Mr. Howbridge," suggested Agnes. "I think he ought to be told everything."

"I agree with you," assented Ruth. "I'll telephone down asking what time we can see him."

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“And while you girls go there, some of us will take another look around the cellar,” said Neale. “I think the whole mystery centers there.”

“Well, we haven’t found much so far—except kittens,” chuckled Luke.

Mr. Howbridge looked rather grave when Ruth told him the story of the night of the storm and what had happened in the cellar. Luke went with her to the lawyer’s office, leaving Neale and Hal to “putter around,” as Mrs. MacCall called it, in the cellar.

“Certainly something seems wrong,” admitted the lawyer. “I am afraid, though, that I can’t agree with you—as I have said before, I believe—about a fortune being hidden in the cellar. I attended to your Uncle Peter’s affairs, and I’m sure if he was so foolish as to hide a fortune away in a cellar I would know something about it. Of course I may be wrong——”

“Yes, but remember about our strange find in the attic? That album filled with all sorts of valuable papers.”

“Ah, that is true,” and the girls’ guardian nodded slowly. “Lemuel Aden’s money!”

“What about Hop Wong?” went on Ruth. “Did you find out anything more from him? You were going to get an interpreter and——”

“Yes, my dear, I obtained the services of the court Chinese interpreter, but I might as well have saved my time. What with the roundabout

manner in which the conversation had to be carried on and the fright of Hop Wong—well, we didn't get anywhere at all."

"Didn't he tell you a thing?" asked Ruth.

"Practically not a thing, my dear girl. He seemed to think he was about to be executed, or, at any rate, jailed. About all the interpreter reported that Hop Wong said was: 'No can tell,' and he asserted this over and over again until I wearied of it. No, I think as far as Hop Wong is concerned, there is no mystery."

"I'm not so sure of that, Mr. Howbridge," said Luke. "Those Chinese are queer fellows. Once they get frightened they lose their tongues."

"Yes, but I did my best to assure Hop Wong that he had nothing to fear," said the lawyer. "I declare, it's beyond me."

"But what of the two men—the tramps who struck Luke down?" asked Ruth.

"That may be a different matter altogether," her guardian admitted. "There, I am willing to confess, may lie some danger and there may be a mystery at the bottom of it. But that it has to do with a fortune—or even a sum of money—I am not so willing to admit."

"What had we better do?" Ruth inquired. "Shall we tell the police?"

"I say no!" cried Luke, with perhaps more energy than he intended. "I beg your pardon for my excitement," he went on. "But I think

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we can solve this ourselves, Mr. Howbridge. At least, we or some of us would like to try it a bit longer. If we call in the police we shall have to report to them every little trifling thing that happens, and they'll be running to the Corner House at all hours of the day and night."

"Yes, there is that probability," admitted Mr. Howbridge. "But have you any plan, Luke?"

"Not yet, no, sir. I'd like to think it over a bit longer."

"But you mustn't run into danger!" stipulated Ruth. "You and Agnes and Neale are all rash."

"No, that would be foolish," said Mr. Howbridge with a quick, discerning glance at the two young people. He understood how matters were going between his ward and the young collegian.

"Oh, we'll be careful," promised Luke.

"Well, of course, being a lawyer, I suppose I ought to advise you to call in the authorities," said the girls' guardian. "But as there is nothing yet to interest the public, I don't see why you can't carry on your private investigations a bit longer, if you like."

"Thank you. We will."

"Only, as Ruth says, don't run into danger," went on Mr. Howbridge. "You, Luke, have had one example of how desperate these men are—provided the one who struck you down is one of the same pair that first was seen around the

Corner House. They will not stop at injuring those who get in their way. So be careful!"

"I will, yes, and I'll warn the others. And now to solve the mystery of the Corner House!" he cried, more gaily than he felt, for his head was still painful.

Returning to the old mansion, Ruth and Luke found there had been no new developments since they had left to see the lawyer. Neale and Hal and Agnes had "prospected" around the cellar, as they called it, but had discovered nothing.

An investigation of the doorbell wires and battery disclosed, however, the reason for the erratic behavior of that piece of apparatus. There was a loose wire, and when the house was jarred, as by a thunderclap, the wire made a connection and started the bell to ringing.

"So the men in the cellar had nothing to do with that," declared Neale, when he had found and remedied the trouble.

"I'm glad of that," said Ruth. "If the bell had been rung by them it would mean they had a regular band, some of whom were on the outside while others were on the inside of the house, searching for the fortune."

"Do you really think some one is after money hidden in the house?" Nalbro asked.

"I do!" declared Neale.

"It's delightfully romantic, I know," the Bos-



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ton girl admitted, "but it doesn't seem reasonable."

"We found a fortune once in the attic for Mrs. Eland and Miss Pepperill. Why not find one for ourselves in the cellar?" questioned Agnes.

"Anyhow, we'll have fun searching for it," said Luke.

However, as the vacation days passed and the time approached for the delightful house party to end, no new discoveries were made. No secret entrance or egress was found in the cellar, Hop Wong made no further efforts to communicate and no trace was seen of the two strange men.

As a matter of fact, Hop Wong had disappeared. He was not at his laundry, the business being carried on by the bland and strange Celestial, and to all inquiries he answered:

"Hop Wong, he mebbe come back bly-an'-bly."

It seemed that the mystery of the Corner House would never be solved when, all unexpectedly, there began a series of events which rapidly moved to a startling conclusion.

It began one pleasant afternoon when Luke and Neale were out riding through a beautiful country district in the automobile with Ruth and Agnes. Hal and Nalbro had gone to the railroad station to see about getting chair-car tickets for Boston, for the time for their return was drawing near.

Neale drove through a little country village

and was preparing to suggest, since the afternoon was waning, that they turn about, when Luke uttered an exclamation.

"What's the matter?" asked Neale. "Did I run over a chicken?"

"No. But this has to do with something closely connected with chickens."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean a Chinese—they're very fond of chicken, you know. There goes one now—a Chinese, I mean!"

He pointed toward a small, ramshackle house standing alone in a field near the highway, just outside the village. And, as the others looked, they saw a Chinese enter this hut.

"Hop Wong!" cried Neale.

"I thought that's who it was, but I didn't want to be too certain," remarked Luke. "So this is where Hop Wong has been hiding!"

"Come on! Let's get hold of him and see if he'll talk," suggested Neale. He ran the car up close to the side of the road near the lonely hut and started to alight.

The Chinese—it was Hop Wong beyond doubt—heard the noise of the brakes and turned. With a yell he fled around the rear of the hut.

"Come on, Luke!" cried Neale. "Let's capture him and see if we can get to the bottom of this!"

## CHAPTER XXI

### A QUEER STORY

HOP WONG was the very personification of fear. He was a small Chinese at best, but now he appeared no larger than a child, so much did he shrink within his garments when he found himself in the grasp of the two young men.

"Oh, the poor fellow!" murmured Ruth, with ready sympathy. "Be kind to him!"

Hop Wong heard her and held out his queer hands with their rather long nails—hands abnormally clean from much dabbling in soap, water and whatever chemicals the Chinese laundrymen use for making clothes white.

"Missie Luth, Hop Wong—he no did do!" he wailed. "He no did do!"

"We know you didn't do anything," said Ruth kindly. "Oh, don't hold him so tightly, Luke."

"He's a slippery beggar, Ruth, and——"

"Oh, he won't run away, I'm sure. Will you, Hop Wong?" she asked.

"No lun! No can do," he said, with pathetic indifference. "You call p'liceman—take Hop Wong jail. No can do," and he sighed wearily.

"Now look here, Hop Wong," began Luke, in

what he doubtless intended for businesslike tones. "There's no use trying to fool us. You know something about money hidden in Miss Ruth's house and you've got to tell us! Do you understand? You've *got* to tell us!"

Turning to his companions Luke said in a low voice:

"I think Mr. Howbridge made a mistake trying to be kind to him. What Hop Wong needs is firmness!"

Luke's manner seemed to have its effect. For, as if by a shake and a shudder he had cast from him some garment for which he no longer had need, the Chinese straightened up somewhat. He appeared to fill his clothes better, and then he said:

"All lite! Hop Wong tell!"

"I thought he would!" chuckled Luke. "Now we'll get at the bottom of this puzzling mystery."

Hop Wong accompanied the boys and girls into the hut where, it appeared, he had taken up his abode. It was simply furnished, and looked as though Hop Wong had been about to start a laundry in this country town, but had not yet done so.

"He came here—ran away—so he couldn't be questioned," decided Neale. "It was lucky you saw him, Luke," he said.

"It may prove so," agreed Luke.

But it was one thing for Hop Wong to promise to tell; the performance was another matter. He

was willing, but his choice, use and command of the English language left much to be desired.

Sitting amid his humble possessions in the lonely cottage, while on empty boxes for seats Ruth, Agnes, Luke and Neale faced him, the Celestial began his recital.

He gibbered and slithered about "two men—topside man—number lun man—much dolls—Clorner House"—and so on until Luke raised his hands in despair.

"I don't wonder Mr. Howbridge couldn't make anything of it," he groaned. "It's worse than I expected."

"What can be done?" asked Ruth. "He seems willing to tell, but I can't make any sense of it."

"Nor I," sighed Agnes.

"Tell him to sing it!" chuckled Neale, at the conclusion of a long-drawn and high-pitched stream of words of which only a few were intelligible to Hop Wong's auditors.

"Wait a minute! We'll get something out of this yet," declared Luke. "You don't have to be back any certain time, do you?" he asked Ruth and Agnes. "I mean at home?"

"No, I suppose not," admitted Ruth. "Mrs. MacCall and Linda will look after Dot and Tess. As for Hal and Nalbro, they are going to the movies in town, after they get their tickets, and they won't be home till late. But why do you ask, Luke?"

"Because I want to take Hop Wong and all of us over to Millville. It isn't far and there's a Chinese student there, spending his vacation, who, I think, can take Hop Wong in hand and get something out of him."

"Well, but if the Chinese court interpreter couldn't get at anything for Mr. Howbridge," began Neale, "how do you expect——"

"I think Charlie Sing—that's the chap I know in college—can sling a little better brand of English than even a court interpreter," said Luke. "Anyhow, it's worth trying."

"All right, it's worth trying," agreed Neale.

"Perhaps Hop Wong won't accompany us," remarked Ruth.

"Oh, I guess he will," asserted Luke, with confidence. "Hop Wong come for ride in buzz-buzz wagon?" he inquired, pointing to the automobile.

A cheerful grin spread over the features of the Celestial. He seemed to have lost all his fears now.

"Sule!" he cried. "Hop Wong velly much like buzz-buzz wagon."

"Hurray!" cried Neale. "So far, so good!"

"I'll stop at the nearest telephone and let Mrs. MacCall know we'll be a bit late," said Ruth, as they started for the car again. Hop Wong was now a willing captive and seemed delighted at the chance of riding in an automobile.

"I think this is the best thing to do," went on



Ruth to her sister, when they were once more under way, having stopped for a moment in the village to telephone to the Corner House.

"Yes," agreed Agnes. "We never could get anything from Hop Wong by ourselves, and Guardy didn't seem much more successful."

They made a good run to Millville and drove up to the boarding house where Charlie Sing was spending the long college vacation, his home being in far-off China.

"Hello, Charlie! Got a job for you!" called Luke in greeting, as he saw the Celestial walking in the garden of the boarding house.

"That's good!" replied Charlie, with a cheerful grin. "It is fine to see you again, Luke," he went on. "It's been pretty lonesome with all the boys scattered."

"I imagine so. Well, we'll all soon be back at college again. It won't be long now. Charlie, you can talk this man's language, can't you?" and he indicated Hop Wong.

"Oh, yes, after a fashion, I suppose," replied Charlie, who spoke a very good English the girls noticed. He was introduced to them and at once proved himself a gentleman as well as a scholar. "Of course," he said, "he talks a dialect rather than the pure Chinese language," and he made this statement after a brief conversation with Hop Wong. "But I think he can make himself

understood to me, and I'll tell you what he says to the best of my ability."

"All right, let go!" said Neale, with cheerful carelessness. "Maybe we'll find out something now."

Then began a rapid exchange of strange-sounding syllables and intonations between Hop Wong and Charlie Sing. There was little use for the others to listen, for they could not, of course, understand a word that was said on either side. But there was a strange fascination in hearing the age-old language.

Luke had briefly told his college friend what it was they desired to find out—about the mystery of the cellar—and finally, after a somewhat lengthy conversation, Charlie Sing held up a hand to signify that Hop Wong should stop talking, for he was flowing on, as Agnes said, "like the brook—forever."

"This is his story," said Charlie Sing, "making some allowances for words that he uses for which, in the proper language, there is no equivalent. Some time ago, before he was in the laundry business in your town, Hop Wong worked as a servant in a house where there were two men. One was a gardener and the other did odd jobs about the place. Handy man, I believe they call such a worker."

"That's right, Charlie," said Luke.

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"One of these men was named Rother and the other called himself Meggs," went on the Chinese student. "The house was a large, country establishment of wealth, and among the visitors was an old man who was not as good as he might have been. I mean he was addicted to the vice of drink," said Charlie, with a shudder of disgust.

"However, I must not get on to that," went on the Chinese student. "It always fills me with disgust. But this old man who came to the house where Rother and Meggs worked with Hop Wong was a drinker. Rother and Meggs forced Hop Wong to get them some liquor so they could sell it to this old man, whose name the laundryman does not know. This man, cut off from his liquor supply because of police activities, was glad to rely on the scoundrels Rother and Meggs."

"But where does the Corner House come in?" asked Neale.

"I am coming to that," replied Charlie. "It is a curious story. It depends on you, yourselves, how much you believe. This man—this old toper, I think you call it, knew a Mr. Peter Stower——"

"Why, he was our uncle!" cried Ruth. She was greatly surprised.

"Well, there is supplied the connection," remarked the translator, calmly. "This old man knew Mr. Peter Stower and had often, so he told Rother and Meggs, visited at the Corner House, as you call it. Once, while there, he says he helped

Mr. Stower hide an iron box of money in the cellar."

"He did?"

"When?"

"Where?"

"How much money was in it?"

"Why did he do that?"

These were some of the questions shot at Charlie Sing when he had translated thus far in the strange story of Hop Wong. The student held up his hand for patience.

"I cannot tell you the reasons," he said. "Hop Wong does not know them himself. All he knows is that Rother and Meggs were told by this old toper that Mr. Peter Stower had hidden a big iron box of money in the cellar."

"That tluce! Them say so! Them know whele money is—Hop Wong not know!" broke in the laundryman. "Two men know—Hop Wong not know!"

He seemed pitfully eager that they should believe him.

## CHAPTER XXII

### ANOTHER ALARM

THERE was a pause. On the part of Charlie Sing and Hop Wong it was for breath, as they had been talking at a pretty steady rate. On the part of Luke, Neale, Ruth and Agnes the pause was welcome because so many ideas had crowded in on them that they wanted time, as Neale said afterward, to untangle their thoughts.

The pause gave them all a chance to do a little thinking, which was absolutely needed at this time. It cannot be said that any of the four had, up to this time, placed much faith in the suggestion that wealth of some sort—possibly a fortune—was concealed in the Corner House cellar. Now, with this unexpected confirmation, came a gasp of surprise.

“Is this all he knows about it?” asked Ruth.

“Why didn’t he tell all this to the other interpreter?” Agnes demanded.

“I can answer that last question first,” replied the Chinese student, “by saying that Hop Wong could not understand the other interpreter’s talk very well. They were at cross purposes, neither one comprehending the other.”

"Then why didn't that court interpreter say so?" demanded Ruth.

"I suppose he thought he wouldn't be paid his fee if he had to admit failure," suggested Luke. "Anyhow, we're getting the straight of it now."

"It's only the beginning," said Neale. "Have him go on. Where in the cellar is the box of gold?"

"And why in the world did Uncle Peter hide his money there?" asked Ruth. "He wasn't a miser if he was queer. He left us the Corner House in his will, why should he conceal part of his money in an iron box, like a miser?"

"I'll ask Hop Wong about that," volunteered Charlie Sing.

There was another session of talk, and at its conclusion the Chinese collegian said:

"Hop Wong really knows only what he overheard. These men, Rother and Meggs, never took him into their confidence, so of course you must accept what Hop Wong says with a dash of pepper."

"I guess you mean a grain of salt," suggested Luke, with a smile.

"Possibly. Oh, yes, it is salt!" chuckled Charlie Sing. "You have almost as many proverbs as we Chinese. Well, Hop Wong can tell only what he overheard. As to the motives of Mr. Stower, he knows nothing. But he heard what these two men said. Later, when Hop Wong left the house



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where he worked with them and found the Corner House and saw the young ladies there, he decided to try to let them know about the fortune and, independent of the two men, to reap a small reward for himself."

"Well, he tried all right!" said Agnes, snappily.

"But he meant no harm. I'm glad to know that," put in Ruth, who seemed to champion the cause of Hop Wong. "But why did he run away?"

Charlie did some more questioning and replied:

"Hop Wong left his laundry in Milton after he tried to disclose to you the secret of the fortune because he was afraid of being arrested. Then, too, he says he saw Rother and Meggs in the town and he thought they might do him some harm for telling their secret."

"Ah, ha! So those men have been in town, have they?" cried Neale. "Those must be the two fake water inspectors!" he added.

"Sure, they are!" exclaimed Agnes. "There is more to this than appears at first sight, boys. I'm not so sure we did well by not getting the police in on it. Perhaps we had better——"

"Oh, we've gone this far alone, let's finish it," suggested Ruth. "But we can't stay here all night. We'd better be getting back to Milton. What are we going to do with Hop Wong? Have we gotten all the information from him we need?"

"He seems to have told all he knows," answered Charlie Sing. "As for taking him back to Milton, I don't believe he'll go. He seems to be afraid—probably of those two men. And I don't see how you can take him back against his will."

"No, probably not—unless we bring in the police," agreed Ruth. "And I don't want to do that. Poor fellow!"

"If he is going to stay where we found him it will do as well—perhaps better, as the men won't know anything about him and we can run over and see him whenever we need to," observed Luke.

"Ask him," suggested Ruth.

And when Charlie again talked to the laundryman, the latter promised not to run away again, but to hold himself in readiness to help the Corner House girls locate the fortune. He would remain at his new location, where he hoped to start another laundry, he said.

"One thing more," suggested Ruth, after thinking over all that had been said. "Hop Wong says he doesn't know this man—this unfortunate old toper who saw Uncle Peter hide the box of gold. But ask him if he knows any clew by which we might find it or look for it in our cellar. Those men were evidently after something hidden there. They must have had some idea where it was. Ask Hop Wong if he can put us on the track."

"I will," said Charlie Sing.

Again he talked in those peculiar, slurring in-

flections that seem part and parcel of the Chinese language, and when he had finished he slipped easily into English, saying:

“Hop Wong says to look for a white star!”

“A white star!” exclaimed Agnes. “Where?”

“In your cellar,” replied Charlie. “Hop Wong says the white star is the mark that shows where the fortune is buried. He heard Rother and Meggs say this.”

“Well, now we seem to be getting on the right trail at last,” commented Luke. “Much obliged, Charlie. We’ll get along back now, and restore Hop Wong to his hut. We’ll be back again at college with the boys soon.”

“And I’ll be glad,” said the Chinese student. “It’s been a lonesome vacation for me.”

Hop Wong, on the journey back, seemed quite a different Chinese from the chap who had written queer notes and appointed midnight trysts under the “boy-pain” tree. He smiled and even tried to perpetrate jokes, it seemed, in his native tongue—an attempt that was wasted on his auditors, though they laughed at his efforts, which seemed to please the laundryman.

Fortunately, Hop Wong did not begin to joke until they were nearly at his new home, and it was soon over.

“Good-night, Hop Wong. See you again soon, maybe,” remarked Luke, as they parted.

“Alle same good-by,” he answered blandly.

"Hop Wong stay hele alle time now. Much good place, but no much money yet."

"Oh, that reminds me!" exclaimed Ruth. "I want to give him something for his information, and if we do find any such fortune as he has provided information about, he'll be entitled to a share. I'm sure Mr. Howbridge would say so. I want to give Hop Wong some money, Luke."

"Well, I don't believe he'd object to it. What say, Hop Wong? You like a little cash?"

"Sule! Cash alle same much good alle time," was the smiling response.

So Ruth, from her purse, provided him with what, to him, must have been a goodly sum, and there was the promise of more should events warrant it.

"Good-by!" called the young people, as they left Hop Wong at his hut and turned the automobile toward Milton.

"Good-by!" he echoed. "You velly good me. Alle same you look white stal get much money. Good-by!"

For a time the four young people rode on in silence. They were all thinking over what had happened. It had come about so suddenly—the chase and capture of Hop Wong, and the strange story he told. Then Luke spoke, asking Ruth:

"What do you think of it?"

"I'm almost afraid to think," she answered.

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"If you ask me," put in Neale, "I'll say it's a dream."

"Dream, nothing, Neale O'Neil! There's a fortune awaiting us—a buried treasure right in our cellar," declared Agnes.

"Seriously," went on Neale, "here's a person—I mean the old man who drank heavily. We all know what that means—the brain doesn't act at its best. And this toper originates a more or less sensational story about a chest of gold being hidden in the cellar of the Corner House. Do any of you believe it?"

"I do, for one!" declared Agnes.

"It does seem far-fetched, even silly," admitted Ruth. "But then, those two men must have believed it, or else they never would have tried to get into our cellar to hunt for the iron box. And Hop Wong believes it, too."

"That's easily accounted for," replied Neale. "The three of them are persons of limited intelligence and low mentality."

"La, la, la!" spluttered Agnes. "I just told you I believe it, Neale O'Neil!"

For a while there was more or less idle talk, then there was a return to the subject of the box of treasure, and Luke said:

"At first I was not much inclined to put faith in Hop Wong's story. As soon as he said the old man drank I began to 'hae me d'ubts,' as Mrs. MacCall would say. But then, have you stopped

to think that it might not have been your Uncle Peter, Ruth, who hid the box?"

"Not Uncle Peter Stower? Why, Hop Wong said it was!"

"I know he did—repeating what he overheard Rother and Meggs say. But they might have been mistaken."

"In what way?" asked Neale.

"Well, Mr. Stower might have concealed the box for his friend, the drinker."

"Oh, that's a new theory!" cried Agnes.

"The only plausible one, I think," went on Luke. "Here is how it sizes up to me. Mr. Stower and this unknown man might have been good friends—in fact Mr. Stower may have tried to break him of the dreadful habit. Perhaps, failing in that and desiring to save for the poor fellow some of the wealth he would otherwise squander on drink, he might have hidden the iron box of this man's gold away in the cellar, marking it, as Hop Wong says, with a white star."

"But if he did hide another man's wealth for that other man's good," asked Agnes, "why didn't he leave some word about it so the man's heirs could claim it?"

"Perhaps," suggested Neale, "he may have intended to leave some sort of memoranda about this hidden wealth—provided there really is any—and when his end came there was no time. Also he might have forgotten it."



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"Here's another thought!" exclaimed Luke. Ideas were coming thick and fast now. "Mr. Stower may really have sent word to this man's relatives or heirs about the chest of money in the cellar, and these scoundrels—Rother and Meggs—may have intercepted that message and be trying for the gold on their own account."

"That sounds plausible, except that we'd have heard of the matter before this, I think," admitted Neale. "But the first thing to do, I'm thinking, is to find out if there really is any gold in the cellar. After we get it, we can settle to whom it belongs."

"That's what I say!" chimed in Agnes.

"It may not be as far-fetched as I thought at first—Luke's explanation is a good one," observed Ruth thoughtfully.

"But it is silly to try to settle who owns a lot of gold you don't even know there is," declared Agnes. "Besides, I'm tired and hungry."

"That's well said!" cried Neale. "We'll get home, have something to eat, and to-morrow we'll have another go at this mystery."

They found Dot and Tess in bed when they arrived. It had been a strenuous day Mrs. MacCall reported, for the three children (Sammy Pinkney being the third member of the trio) had gotten into all sorts of mischief.

"What was the worst thing they did?" asked Ruth.

"Well, they played 'Plam Island,' as Dot calls it," reported the housekeeper, "and Sammy fastened that beastie of an alligator on the tail of Sandyface, the cat, to pretend, as he says, that the alligator was going to eat the cat up."

"Oh, the cruel boy!" gasped Ruth. "And Sandyface with a new batch of kittens!"

"But Tess never stood for that, did she, Mrs. Mac?" asked Agnes.

"Oh, she and Dot did their best to stop him, but they couldn't. So I boxed his ears well and sent him hame!" declared Mrs. MacCall. "He'll not come near me for a day or two, I wager!"

"Do tell us all that happened to you," begged Nalbro. "You look so excited about something!"

"We are," whispered Agnes. "It's—the *fortune!*"

And later, when Mrs. MacCall and Linda had retired, the story of the day's outing was repeated with many exclamations of wonder.

"This settles it!" declared Hal firmly. "Not a step do I stir in the direction of Boston until we have a search for the buried treasure! Crackie! To think that Dot and Tess weren't so far out after all. Ho, for the buried gold!"

"Under the mystic white star!" declaimed Nalbro.

"Hush!" begged Ruth, with an uneasy glance at the doors and windows. "Do you want those ruffians breaking in on us?"

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“What ruffians?” demanded Nalbro.

“Rother and Meggs!” fairly hissed Neale, giving a fair imitation of a stage villain.

They laughed at him, but it might be noticed that before Luke and Neale left that night, Ruth went about looking well to the fastenings of all doors and casements.

“We’ll be over early and have a look for the white star as the guiding mark to the gold,” promised Luke, as he and Neale left.

Had Tess and Dot a remote suspicion that a treasure-hunt was in progress that day they never would have gone on the little picnic that Ruth and Agnes arranged for them with Sammy and Linda. But, as it was, the little girls departed in blissful ignorance.

Then a search of the cellar was made, a systematic search by six young people who carried lanterns and flashlights.

“We might as well look for the star first of all,” declared Agnes, as they started in.

“And where would you suggest it might be found?” asked Neale.

“Somewhere around the walls,” Agnes answered.

“The box of gold is probably buried in the cellar floor—it’s mostly of dirt and could have been easily dug up,” Ruth said. “Then, to make sure the location would not be lost, a white star was painted on the side wall—somewhere. We must

look for the white star! Otherwise we'll have to excavate the entire cellar bottom."

Accordingly a search for the white star was made. It was no easy search, as the cellar was large and rambling. But six pairs of eyes divided the task and the side walls were thoroughly gone over.

But there was not a trace of a white star.

"It must have been washed away when the cellar was flooded last year," suggested Ruth. The others agreed with her.

"Well, then, the other thing to do—lacking the guiding star—is to start and dig up the whole cellar—foot by foot," decided Luke.

"It's a job," groaned Neale.

"But it's worth it!" declared Agnes.

"Cricket!" exclaimed Hal. "Think of telling the fellows at home that I took part in a treasure-hunt—a real treasure-hunt! And right here in the settled part of the U. S. A.!"

"The hunt is going to be real, whether the treasure is or not!" laughed Nalbro, who did not take the matter very seriously.

"We'll find it yet!" declared Agnes. "You'll see!"

"But I suggest that we wait until to-morrow before digging up the cellar," said Ruth. "It's getting late."

This was true. Their preparations, the sending away of Tess and Dot and the search of the

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cellar, had taken up most of the day. Evening was now coming on.

“All hands on deck bright and early in the morning!” commanded Agnes gayly. “Wear your old clothes!”

As Nalbro’s visit was drawing to an end it was planned to have a little gathering of friends at the Corner House that evening, and soon after supper the young people began to arrive.

The jolly little affair passed off successfully. By a mighty effort only, Agnes restrained herself from telling of the treasure she had fully persuaded herself was buried in the cellar.

When all had departed save Luke and Neale and while they were taking their leave of Ruth and Agnes, Ruth suddenly exclaimed:

“Hark! I hear something!”

“Where?” asked her sister.

“In the cellar! Listen!”

They all listened amid tense silence.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE CAPTURE

THERE was no mistake about it—a noise was audible in the cellar of the Corner House. It was not an insistent noise, rather it was a subdued one, as though the cause of it, whether man or beast, was desirous of concealing something.

“Do you suppose it could be them?” whispered Agnes.

“Who?” asked Neale, though he could guess.

“Those men Hop Wong told about. Are they coming back to have another search for the buried gold?”

“We’ll soon find out!” declared Hal, who stood with Nalbro and the others in the hall, where the leave-taking had been going on. “Us for the cellar, boys!” and he looked at Neale and Luke.

“Wait a minute!” begged Ruth. “Let’s be sure of them this time! Don’t let them get away—provided it’s those men!”

“It’s somebody all right,” declared Nalbro, with a little shiver which brought her closer to Hal. “And they seem to be digging. Listen! Don’t you hear a thudding sound?”

In the silence that followed the whispers they



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were all aware of a distinct thudding sound as if picks were being wielded on the soft bottom of the Corner House cellar.

"I think they have nerve to come and dig under our very noses!" declared Agnes. "When we're entertaining company, too!"

"It's because of the company that they came, I fancy," replied Ruth. "They figured that so much noise would be going on that they wouldn't be heard. They probably have been watching their chance to sneak in when the house was busy."

"This is terrible!" complained Agnes. "We are being spied upon the whole time! Something must be done! Neale, what are you going to do?"

"Is there a gun or anything like it around the house?" Neale asked, by way of answer to Agnes' appeal.

"Oh, don't have any shooting!" pleaded Nalbro.

"It isn't pleasant, but it may come to that," said Neale.

"Oh, Luke—" began Ruth, appealing to him.

"I think it would be better if we had some sort of weapon," was Luke's reply. "It would be rather foolish, to say nothing else, for us to go up against these men, who may be desperate, if we have nothing to force them to surrender in case we corner them. If there is a gun or a revolver——"

"I have put Uncle Peter's old revolver away," Ruth said. "Come and we'll get it."

"Better be a bit lively," suggested Agnes. "They may skip out with the gold any minute."

"If they don't find it any quicker than we did they're not likely to," chuckled Hal.

"It might not be a bad scheme for us to lay low and let them locate the treasure for you, girls, and then take it away from them," suggested Neale.

"Oh, why don't you?" asked Agnes. "They must know just where to search for it, white star and all!"

"The only trouble is," answered Neale, "that they might skip out with it before we could stop them. No, on second thought, I'd say let's tackle them at once, capture them, and make them tell the secret."

Luke and Ruth came back into the hall, Luke carrying the revolver.

"This is more like it!" declared Hal. "Now we can talk business to them. They're still at it down there."

Some sort of noise was still audible in the cellar. Whether it was what the young folks supposed it to be—men digging after treasure—or something else, who could say?

"Maybe it's only Sandyface making a new home for her family," suggested Ruth, with a smile.

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"She wouldn't make all that noise," declared Neale. "Well, shall we go?" he asked the other two young men.

"Better make up a plan of campaign first," suggested Ruth. "The other time these fellows got away—the time they struck Luke on the head. We don't want that to happen again."

"Perhaps you're right, Ruth," said Luke. "We'd better divide forces. Two of us——"

"We're only three altogether," objected Hal. "You can't divide three evenly and——"

"We can call Uncle Rufus," decided Ruth. "He is old and not very strong, but he'll add to our numbers. I'll get him."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," agreed Luke. "At least he can be posted at one vantage point to give an alarm if the men try to escape."

"Provided, of course, that it is men and not a cat," put in Agnes flippantly.

"Oh, I think it will prove to be those fellows all right," was Luke's opinion.

Uncle Rufus was eager and ready for the coming battle, or whatever it should resolve itself into. It was planned that Luke and Hal should go down the inside cellar stairs, while Neale and Uncle Rufus stood at the outside cellar door to capture the men if they came out that way.

"We haven't a gun," objected Neale, when his part was assigned.

"Bang 'em on de haid wif a club," suggested

Uncle Rufus. "We kin hit 'em w'en dey comes up de cellar steps."

"That's a good idea, Neale," said Agnes.

"A club it shall be, then," replied Neale.

He and the colored man thus armed themselves and took their places.

Meanwhile, Mrs. MacCall and Linda had been roused to remain with the girls; though Agnes, in order not to miss any of the excitement, followed Neale and stationed herself not far from him and Uncle Rufus where she could see all that went on, if, indeed, anything did happen.

Ruth stood near the telephone to send at once the alarm in to the police, once the supposed visitors should be captured. It had been ascertained by a cautious test that the telephone was in working order.

At last all was in readiness. Luke and Hal, with the former carrying the revolver ready for quick aim, and Hall with a flashlight, started down the inner stairway to the cellar. They had drawn on, over their shoes, at the suggestion of Ruth, old stockings to make their footfalls softer.

Neale and Uncle Rufus, each armed with a stout stick of wood, went out the back kitchen door and took their places at the back cellar entrance, followed by Agnes. It was here that Neale made a discovery that struck him as being curious.

"Why," he whispered, "they didn't leave this door open after they went in this way."

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“Eh? Why should dey leave it open?” asked Uncle Rufus.

“So they could get out again in a hurry if they had to—and they may have to. I never heard of such stupid fellows. They close their way of escape. Hum! That makes me think!”

“What’s dat?” asked Uncle Rufus, whose hearing was not of the best.

“I was just thinking,” went on Neale, “that perhaps they didn’t get into the cellar this way after all. If they didn’t—and if there is some other way out and in than the inside stairs—it may explain a lot of things. But never mind that now. We won’t open this door, Uncle Rufus. In fact we’ll just sit down on it.”

“Sit down on it?”

“Yes, that will make it all the harder for the fellows to lift it up and get out. Come, let’s take it easy.”

Uncle Rufus laughed and Agnes giggled. This drew Neale’s attention to the girl.

“Aggie!” he exclaimed. “What are you doing here? Go back into the house!”

“I’ll not, so there! I want to see all that’s to be seen. And then you don’t think for a minute, do you, that I’m going to let you be all pounded up or something, Neale O’Neil, and not be near to help you?”

“Oh, come, Agnes. You’re my faithful chum, I know. But please go in now. Uncle Rufus and

I are safer than you would be, for if the fellows saw us, they would run away from us, probably right in your direction. Then, for you, it would be good-night."

After some further talk, in which Uncle Rufus joined, Agnes consented to return to the house. Neale and Uncle Rufus took their seats on the slanting cellar door as soon as Agnes disappeared.

Meanwhile Luke and Hal were going softly down the inner stairs. Hal held the flashlight in readiness for instant use, but he and his companion had no sooner started to descend the stairs than they became aware of a dim light in the cellar and they knew, since the regular electric lights were not switched on, that it came from the intruders.

"We'll keep ours dim," whispered Luke. "That will give us an advantage. It's always best to be in the dark when you're hunting a burglar."

"Better be careful," whispered Agnes, who, banished from the outside door, had taken her place in the kitchen, to be as near the excitement as possible.

"We will," promised Luke.

Step by step he and Hal descended, their stocking-covered shoes making no sound. It was nervous work and they were under a strain. But they wanted to see the outcome of it all.

They reached the cellar bottom and started



away from the foot of the stairs. The dim light was growing brighter, the light used by some intruders in their search.

A few seconds later Luke and Hal caught sight of two men bending over a hole they had dug in the cellar bottom. They were near one of the walls, and on the ground beside them was an electric flashlight turned on. The forms of the men were plainly visible, though their faces were in the shadow.

"They're the same ones!" whispered Luke, meaning the same twain who had been in the cellar before and the same men Luke had heard talking in the railroad train.

Suddenly the silence of the cellar was broken as one of the men remarked:

"Nothing here!"

"No," agreed the other, "we'll have to——"

At that instant one of them either caught sight of Luke and Hal or else heard some noise made by the lads, for the man who had first spoken cried:

"Look out! We're caught! Come on!"

In an instant the two intruders leaped up, and one picked the light from the floor. Then, to the surprise of Luke and Hal, the men, instead of dashing toward the outer door of the cellar, sprang toward the front, inner wall.

"Come on!" cried Luke, for further conceal-

ment was useless. "They can't get out that way. It's a solid stone wall! We'll have them!"

"Go on!" yelled Hal.

At the same time he switched on his own flashlight, since it was necessary to show a gleam on the path he and Luke were to take, and the men were now using their own little torch.

It was now an open pursuit, with the intruders speeding toward the front wall of the cellar and Luke and Hal after them.

But Luke was mistaken when he cried out that the men could not get out the way they were going. Piled up in the front of the cellar of the Corner House were some old boxes. Dodging in around and among these the two men were lost to sight for a moment.

Daringly Hal and Luke followed and, to their surprise, they saw where the boxes had been pulled away from the wall, showing an old door, the existence of which was unknown, at least to the present owners of the Corner House.

It was out of this door that the men fled. Evidently it was by this way they came in, rather than the back door, and they seemed to be familiar with the egress.

Undaunted, Luke and Hal followed. Outside the newly disclosed door was a short flight of stone steps. They led up beneath what Luke recognized as the front porch, and the situation was now clear to him.

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In years past there had been a front areaway entrance to the cellar. This had gone out of use and the porch had been built over it, a lattice work around the lower part of the porch concealing the door leading into the cellar.

Up the steps ran the two men. A quick motion served to throw down part of the lattice work, which, doubtless, had been previously loosened by the intruders, and in a few seconds they were out in the open, speeding away in the moonlight.

But Luke and Hal were close behind them, for they, too, ran up the steps and scrambled out beneath the front porch.

"Hold on there! Stop! We want you!" cried Luke.

"Neale! Uncle Rufus! Come around to the front!" cried Hal, realizing that the two on guard would know nothing of this frontal escape.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" ordered Luke.

For a few seconds more the midnight visitors sped on. Hal was racing after them, and around the house could be heard coming Neale and Uncle Rufus.

Then the three boys and Uncle Rufus sprang upon the midnight intruders and bore them to the ground.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE WHITE STAR

THE capture of the two men took place in a cleared spot in the yard around the Corner House, a place well illuminated by the brilliant moonlight. So every move of the suspects was plain to be seen.

Neale gave a gasp as he saw Agnes emerging from the door under the porch. Hearing the commotion in the cellar when the pursuit of the two intruders had begun, she had dashed down the stairs and followed as quickly as possible in their wake.

From the house now came Ruth and Nalbro, with Mrs. MacCall and Linda. Ruth caught sight of the man who had first fallen. He was just then starting to rise.

"Oh, Luke!" she cried, "don't shoot him. Please don't!"

"I won't," answered the boy. "It won't be necessary."

"Do you surrender?" demanded Neale, swinging his club suggestively.

"I reckon we'll have to," growled one of the men sullenly. "I stumbled," he went on, as he arose. "But——"

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"But if you think you're going to pull off anything because the young lady says not to shoot, get that idea out of your head!" cried Neale menacingly, as he advanced with his substantial club.

"Oh, we know when we're beaten," growled the other man. "We weren't doing anything, anyhow."

"No? Not even trespassing in the cellar?" asked Luke, with sarcasm.

"Oh, well, if we'd found anything we'd have given you folks a share," said the second man, who was now on his feet again.

"I suppose we can believe that or not, as we see fit," remarked Luke.

Now the question arose of what to do with the two captured men. Captured they were, since they must see the futility of trying to escape from double their number of males, to say nothing of Mrs. MacCall and Linda, who, in actual strength, were the equal of the tramps.

"You fellows may as well consider yourselves under arrest," said Luke. "You can take it quietly, or you can make a fuss if you please. I'd advise you to take it quietly and come with us."

"I hope they tell us where the iron box of gold is hidden!" exclaimed Agnes, and they all noticed that the men started in surprise.

"Do you know about it?" asked the one afterward identified as Max Rother.

"We certainly do!" declared Ruth. "Hop Wong has given us all the particulars."

"That Chink!" growled Simon Meggs. "I always was suspicious of him."

"Settle one thing first," suggested Luke. "Are you coming with us quietly or shall we use force?"

"Oh, we'll come along," snapped out Rother. "But where are you taking us? We haven't done anything to be arrested for—except maybe sneak in, trespass as you call it. You can't do much to us for that. We haven't taken a thing."

"Maybe we won't send for the police after all," said Ruth. "It all depends on what you tell us. As you say, you haven't done anything yet."

"Except frighten us all a bit, and bang Luke Shepard over the head," put in Agnes. "And if you are willing to tell us where the box of gold is, maybe we'll let you go, provided you promise not to come back."

"I guess we'll have to do as you say. There's no help for it," grumbled Meggs. "But I don't believe you'll find the money. We couldn't, and we've had several trials after it."

"In the first place—is there any money?" asked Ruth.

"We think there is, lady," answered Rother.

"Whose money is it?" demanded Luke. "Suppose you tell us about it. Everything you do to save us work will count in your favor."

"Well, it was going to be our money if we



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found it," said Rother. "But at the start it belonged to Collis Ingleton."

"The heavy drinker?" asked Luke at a venture.

"How'd you know that?" asked Meggs with a perceptible start.

"Never mind how. Was he a drinker?"

"He was a soak, if that's what you mean, asking the ladies' pardon for giving it a plain name," said Rother. "And when he couldn't get what he wanted elsewhere we supplied him. He said we would be rewarded by finding the box of gold in this cellar and we've been trying for it ever since."

"Then the money didn't belong to Mr. Stower?" asked Ruth.

"Maybe some of it did. He and this Ingleton were in business together once on a time," Meggs answered. "But Ingleton said it was all his, and Mr. Stower took it from him to save it and buried it."

"But Ingleton said we could have it if we found it. That was to pay for keeping him in liquor," said Rother. "Oh, I know it's a terrible bad thing," he admitted, as he saw the look of loathing on the faces of the girls. "We're bad men—not as bad as some, maybe, but bad enough. This man suffered a lot. And he couldn't stop. He just had to have liquor."

"We got into it against our will, and we made

up our minds to quit and live straight after we got this money," added Meggs.

"Do you think there is any chance of getting it?" asked Agnes.

"We did at one time," Rother replied. "But I'm not so sure now. We looked around and dug whenever we could without letting you folks know about it. But the white star doesn't seem to give the location as we thought it would."

"The white star!" cried Ruth. "Is there a white star in the cellar? We couldn't find it."

"Where did you look?" asked Rother.

"All around the walls."

"You should have looked overhead—on the beams. It's there all right," said the man, with a grin. "Stars are always overhead, lady."

"That's so! We never thought of that!" cried Agnes. "Of course a star would be as high up as it could be placed!"

"Do you mean to say you have located the star in the cellar? The star that Hop Wong said indicated the location of the iron box of gold?" asked Neale.

"Reckon Hop Wong told all he knew," murmured Meggs. "Yes, we have located the star."

"Come and show us," ordered Luke. "And no tricks, mind!"

"Oh, we're past tricks," said Rother humbly enough. "We'll play into your hands now. Only,

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if you do locate any money—well, maybe you'll give us enough to get a fresh start."

"We'll see," Ruth replied guardedly.

The boys carefully guarded the men, surrounding them as they all went back to the cellar.

"We never knew that other door was there!" exclaimed Ruth, when they saw how the men had entered and left the cellar.

"That's one of the things Uncle Peter kept to himself," said Agnes. "There seems to have been a number of them."

The lights were turned on in the cellar, and then, followed by the Corner House girls and their friends, the men led the way to the corner where they had been digging when surprised by Luke and Hal.

"There's the white star," remarked Rother, pointing to a beam overhead.

And there, showing faintly in the half darkness, was a white star painted on one of the beams. Just beneath it was the beginning of an excavation in the cellar bottom.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE ALLIGATOR'S TAIL

"THERE'S the white star, surely enough!" exclaimed Agnes, when they had all seen it.

"You started to dig just beneath it. is that it?" Luke asked the two men.

"Yes, that's what we understood we were to do," remarked Rother.

"But so far—" began Meggs, when Neale with a cry interrupted and demanded:

"You fellows haven't found the gold and hidden it somewhere else, have you?"

"Found the gold? Not much! If we had we wouldn't be coming back at the risk—well, we wouldn't have come back and be caught as we are if we had the coin," answered Rother.

"As a matter of fact, we hadn't finished digging when you saw us," went on Meggs.

"But I don't think we will find it, not if we dig down to China," went on his partner.

"Why not?" asked Hal, quickly.

"You haven't dug far enough to find out. You've only scratched the surface here," said Neale as he looked where the earth had been turned up.

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"No matter. I went far enough to make sure this ground hadn't been disturbed in a hundred years," declared Rother. "It was as hard as flint. If any box had ever been buried there the ground would show some sign of it, and it doesn't. I think we're fooled, if you asked me," he concluded.

"Well, perhaps it was all a fairy story," assented Luke. "But we'll have a try at it."

"To-night?" asked Ruth, for she saw Luke take up a spade.

"To-night—yes. There is no time like the present. And since your visitors, Ruth, seem to like the work we'll let them do it," and Luke handed the implement to Rother and motioned to him to begin.

"Maybe this is only fair. I reckon we did give you a lot of trouble," said the tramp. "But we won't find anything—not if we dig all night."

And he was right. Though he and his companion turned up the earth in many parts of the cellar, working at each point of the star as an indicator, nothing was found.

It was nearly morning when Ruth gave the word to stop. But no one was weary, unless it was the tramps who had been made to do most of the labor.

"Well, I guess it was all a hoax," said Agnes, with a sigh that had in it something of disappoint-

ment. "I think your toper friend was romancing."

"I'm sure of it," declared Rother. "He fooled us all right, as might have been expected from an old soak. Well, if you'll let us go, we'll clear out and not bother you again. We thought there was gold in the cellar; but, well, there just isn't."

"What do you say, Ruth, shall we let them go?" asked Luke.

"Oh, yes. They really have done nothing except trespass, and I don't like the idea of appearing in court against them, as we should need to. Let the poor fellows go."

"Thanks, lady," mumbled Meggs. "I'm sorry there wasn't any money."

"Perhaps it's just as well," said Ruth.

"Oh, and we wanting a new automobile the worst way!" gasped Agnes. "I like your nerve!"

But it seemed the best way out, and the men were allowed to depart. This they did hurriedly, thankful in one respect and doubtless much disappointed in another. Their dream of wealth was over.

But when Luke and Neale had gone home for a few hours' sleep and had come back again, the young people took another look down in the cellar by such daylight as entered through the opened rear door and the long-unsuspected entrance beneath the front porch.

However, even that search resulted in nothing,



and the Corner House girls and their friends came to the somewhat reluctant conclusion that the whole story was more or less of a hoax.

As for Sammy, Tess, and Dot, they were bitterly disappointed at the outcome of it all when they were told of the night's adventure.

"I wish I'd 'a' been there to help capture the robbers!" cried Sammy.

"They weren't robbers," said Agnes. "They didn't steal anything."

"Well, they would 'a' been if they could 'a' found the chest of gold!" declared Sammy. "Hi, where you goin' with my alligator, Dot?" he called, for he had brought his Palm Island pet over to the Corner House with him, following the giving up of the search on the part of Luke and the others.

"I'm not going anywhere with your old alligator," Dot answered. "But he's wiggled himself down cellar and I'm going after him, so there!"

Sammy was eager to hear all the particulars of the night's chase, and he did not go down cellar, even to rescue his beloved saurian. Dot, however, was not one to give up once she started a mission, and presently she was heard moving about amid the boxes and barrels, doubtless after the scaly creature.

"Well, there's one thing we won't have to worry about," said Ruth, "and that is the pres-

ence of those two mysterious men. When we didn't know who they were and what they were after, it was a constant source of anxiety. Now they have gone for good."

At that moment Dot came up out of the cellar and hurried to where all the others were sitting in chairs beneath the shade of the grape arbor near the rear door. There was a strange look on her face.

"What's the matter?" asked Ruth, sensing that something had happened.

"Sammy's alligator! He went down in the cellar, and I went after him and—and—" began Dot excitedly.

"Well, is he lost or did you find him?" interrupted Sammy. "If he's gone, Dot Kenway——"

"No, he isn't zactly gone," explained Dot, with wounded dignity. "But he crawled in a crack between two stones and only his tail was sticking out and I got hold of it and I pulled, and it—it came *right out!*"

"Mercy! You don't mean to say you pulled off the poor alligator's tail, did you?" cried Agnes.

"Maybe he'll grow another as a crab grows a new claw," Luke said consolingly, as he saw the look of anguish on Sammy's face.

"No, I didn't pull the alligator's tail off!" declared Dot. "It was on too fast, I guess. But I pulled him and he came out of the crack, and the

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stone came out with him and there's a hole there, and there's an iron box in the hole, and——"

Dot did not finish. With whoops on the part of the boys and shrieks on the part of the girls, the whole party made a rush for the cellar. The afternoon sun was now shining in it, making the place fairly bright.

"Show me where you pulled the 'gator out, Dot!" begged Neale.

"There. You can see the hole and the iron box!"

And there it was!

The lost treasure! Curiously, as they discovered later, one of the points of the white star on the beam overhead pointed directly to the stone in the wall behind which the iron box had been hidden for so many years. It was thus the clew should have been interpreted, it seemed.

It was an old box of thin sheet iron, and not heavy cast iron, and as it was rusty it was soon opened. Out on the bench in the yard the hidden wealth, for the first time in many years, was exposed to the light of the sun.

"Then those men were right after all!" murmured Ruth.

"In a way, yes," admitted Luke. "But it took Dot and Sammy's alligator to get at the real secret."

"Well, I'm glad it was one of the Corner House girls who actually solved the mystery," said Ruth.

And the mystery was solved.

The wealth did not amount to as much as perhaps Neale and Agnes in their wild dreams had dared to hope, but it was a substantial sum. It would have been a small fortune to the two tramps had they been able to secure it for themselves.

"What shall we do with it?" asked Tess, as they saw the piles of gold and paper money.

"Buy a new auto the first thing!" cried Agnes.

"No, we must give it to whoever owns it," said Ruth. "Put it all back, Luke. We must take it to Mr. Howbridge."

"Yes," he agreed, "that's the only thing to do."

The girls' guardian was greatly surprised.

"I never imagined there was anything to that queer story," he said. "It wasn't at all like Mr. Stower to do something he didn't tell me. But I suppose he had his reasons. Well, now to find out whose money it is, and if there are no heirs—well, it goes to the Corner House girls, of course."

"And boys!" added Ruth. "For they helped us find it."

"Hop Wong ought to get some," said Dot. "I like him, even if he is a funny man. But he doesn't seem to be made of china."

"Yes, Hop Wong will get his share," said Mr. Howbridge, amid laughter.

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“And maybe those two tramps ought to have some, too. We’ll see,” added Ruth.

Though the finding of the money was kept as quiet as possible, yet it made a stir in Milton, and many a throng of curious ones came to stare at the Corner House and the inmates thereof.

Mr. Howbridge made diligent inquiries and found the story to be substantially as told by Rother and Meggs. The unfortunate friend of Uncle Peter, whose failing Mr. Stower had done his best to hide, really owned the money. It had been hidden to try to save it from going for liquor. As he died without leaving any relatives, there was none to claim the wealth.

After that a diligent search was made through the papers left by Mr. Stower and finally a document was brought to light in which the former partner left all his earthly possessions to the owner of the Corner House.

Then, as the Corner House girls succeeded to all of Uncle Peter’s belongings they, naturally, fell heirs to the iron box of money.

“And now may we have the new car?” asked Agnes, when it was all settled.

“Yes,” chuckled her guardian, “if only to keep you quiet.”

So Agnes was made happy, and so, also, was Hop Wong, for he was given a substantial sum, enough to enable him to clear off the debt on his laundry and start afresh. And later still, the two

tramps were located and given new outfits of clothing and a little cash.

"If Agnes has a new car I think we ought to have new playthings," declared Dot, "'cause I found the money."

"And there ought to be a new basket for Sandy-face to keep her kittens in," added Tess.

"That shall be done!" laughed Ruth.

"And I should think maybe we could give Sammy a little chain for his alligator so it wouldn't get lost again," suggested Dot.

"I think that's the least we can do for Sammy, after the part his pet played in revealing the hidden gold," agreed Ruth. And so it was done.

"Well," remarked Nalbro when she left for Boston with Hal, "I must say I have had a most delightful vacation at the Corner House. And it was so romantic!"

"Glad you liked it," returned Agnes.

"Come again next summer," put in Ruth.  
"Maybe something else will happen."

And something else did, and what it was will be related in another volume, to be called "The Corner House Girls Facing the World." In that book we shall see what all of the girls were capable of doing under very trying circumstances.

From his papers Ruth and Agnes learned much concerning their Uncle Peter's work in behalf of the partner who had all but drunk himself to death. He had done his utmost to reform



## 250 The Corner House Girls Solve a Mystery

the man, but without avail. Then he had done what he could to save the unfortunate one's money, and this had occurred just before his own death.

And so the mystery came to an end and the puzzling noises around the old Corner House ceased. Sammy got his new chain for the alligator and was correspondingly happy.

"He is going to make the alligator learn new tricks," announced Dot.

"Mercy! haven't we had tricks enough?" cried Agnes.

"What I can't understand," went on Dot, frowning, "is about Mr. Hop Wong."

"What can't you understand?" asked Agnes.

"I've looked and looked and looked," went on the littlest Corner House Girl, "and he isn't a Chinaman! There isn't the least bit of china about him, so there!"

THE END

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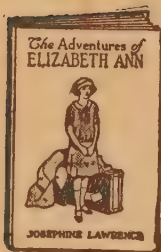
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